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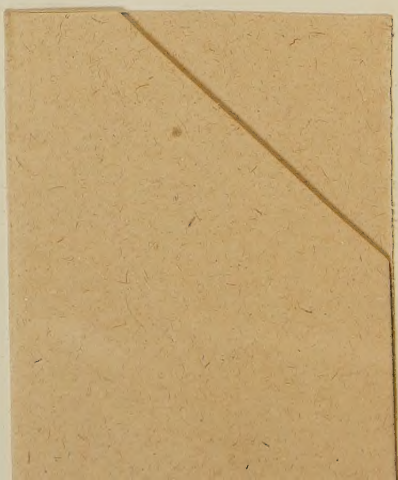

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MISTRESS BRIDGET.

"Ring out wild bells to the wild sky.

* * * * *

"Ring out a slowly dying cause,
And ancient forms of party strife;
Ring in the nobler modes of life,
With sweeter manners, purer laws.

"Ring out the want, the care, the sin,
The faithless coldness of the times;
Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes,
But ring the fuller minstrel in.

"Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic scandal and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good."

In Memoriam.

TENNYSON.

MISTRESS BRIDGET

A Novel

By

E. YOLLAND

Author of

'In Days of Strife,' &c., &c

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DEDICATION.

IN THE DIAMOND JUBILEE YEAR

OF

H.M. QUEEN VICTORIA'S REIGN.

INSCRIBED

TO

"OUR MAJOR,"

IN PLEASANT MEMORY

OF MUCH WILLING HELP.

"Be to . . . virtues very kind;
Be to . . . faults a little blind."

—PRIOR.

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

In Cloth Gilt, 6/-.

IN DAYS OF STRIFE.

BY

E. YOLLAND.

F. V. WHITE & Co.,

14, BEDFORD STREET, STRAND, W.C.

ST. JOHN'S INSTITUTE

MISTRESS BRIDGET.

Anno Domini, 1897.

I.

INTRODUCTION.

HOW THE BELLS BEGAN.

"On the floor are mysterious footsteps,
There are whispers along the walls."

—LONGFELLOW.

ONE of the Western Counties of England stands out in bold relief for all time as the home of the earliest Church, and for possessing for centuries the richest Abbey. With the long line of saintly records of religious strife in those far gone ages, we meddle not—all histories teem with them. The rich red soil, the fertile pastures, the sheltering hills, no doubt prompted the Welsh to bestow the name of "Gylâd-yr-Haf"—"The Land of Summer," upon the well-renowned county of Somerset, with its 1,049,815 acres, and ever-varying

population. Well renowned truly, but with murky clouds of persecution, death, and disaster forming the solid background; possessing from the Past to the Present age, a rich store of Legends, hardly if ever equalled by any other county belonging to the English realm, over whose dominions the sun never sets.

* * * * * *

Belonging to Somersetshire, yet at no great distance from the Devonshire border, stands a tiny country church, with thick white-washed, unadorned walls, just a few simple benches (pews if you like to call them by so dignified a name), a small recessed chancel with narrow lancet windows, and one or two memorial slabs on the floor and walls. Also what was perhaps the most valuable thing in the building, a beautiful old carved chancel screen, with its rich colouring of red and blue showing but little trace of age. Underfoot a rough, uneven pavement, with gaps and holes from missing mortar; and above all, beyond all, a pervading smell of damp and dry rot. So far the inside. Outside, a tower large for the body

of the church, possessing a peal of somewhat rusty bells, whose frayed ropes hung limply down in varying lengths from the dark cavity above, crowned in its turn by a rotting platform, from whose once sound summit many a beacon fire had blazed forth in the days that are no more.

A half stumble on the floor, a curious glance for the cause, and a stare of surprise at a queer little oblong, dust-filled space at my feet, caused the natural question to the showman sexton (a cheerful old man of eighty):

"And what is that?"

"Nobbut a bit of tin, that caused folks' feet to trip, so I tuk hur into the vestry, where you can see hur for yourselves if you are curious like."

The vestry was large for the size of the church, and maybe a trifle lighter, without quite so many creeping ivy trails over the thick glass.

The brass was the smallest I have ever seen, and though worn and defaced by age and ill-usage, still outlined a woman's form, with hands piously joined together, and garments hanging in severe folds.

"Ay! 'Tis Madam herself, the Squire put it

up to her; he thought a deal on her he did, so I've heard my great, great grandfather said, and he should have known, seeing he lived at the same time; though it's true he was but a young lad when that brass was new. Beg pardon, ladies, did I hear aright? Were you asking who 'Madam' was?"

An uneasy glance around, an instinctive ruffling of the silver locks, a distinct sidling nearer the door, warned us the subject was evidently regarded as one of nervous thrills, believed in, almost worshipped, even after the lapse of centuries up to our own days.

The story of the past follows in due order; the traditions surviving at the present day will more fitly form the Introduction. At any rate so it came to us, and so we hand it on, even at the risk of being accused of putting the cart before the horse.

The bells that still hang in the old church tower are dusty and dull, and quite useless; no mortal hands can wake an echo from their ancient sides, no vigorous pulling of lusty men can make the clappers swing. They rang their

last, it is said, all by themselves when Madam died; and sound of awe and fear as those muffled bells had become long before *then*, not a feeble echo had sounded since all down the ages! Pray God *never* again would they be heard, for awful would be the sound, certain the warning.

Whilst the tower itself resisted the passage of Time, by common consent the bells would remain, for no Somersetshire man would dare to brave unknown evil by removing them. The old man pointed to a queer yellow chart hanging on the western wall, which in crabbed fine writing and much-faded ink, described the mottoes on the bells above. Curiosity and interest combined made us peruse the same.

Legend on the Storm Bell.

Voce meo viva depello conte nociva.

2nd Bell.—Ave Maria Gracia Plena. R. S.

3rd Bell.—I sound to beid the sick repent.
In hope of life when breath is spent.

Big Bell.—I to the Church the living call,
And to the grave do summon all.

These Bells were consecrated to the Glory of God and for the Holy Service of this Church by Bishop Grant 1479.

Then came some unreadable lines, and again clearer—evidently added at a later date—

In conformity with the Society of Bells lately inaugurated at Bristol, a fine of sixpence will be enforced on any ringer forgetting to kneel down and pray before entering the belfry, for the first offence, for the second, banishment from office.

Silently the old man waited until I had reached the bottom line, and turned to him with the obvious question *why* the date of the consecration of the bells had never been filled in.

"Well, ladies, it was after this manner. There had been a deal of talk about the new bells, how handsome they were, good tone and shape, far too grand for such as we, some said; but there was a rumour afoot that the Squire who gave the bells, used what now folks call conscience money, else he never would have given so much, as all counted him as rare and close-fisted. Be that as it may, the bells were reckoned a noble gift, and his generosity lauded to the skies. It was to be a grand affair altogether—wrestling and grinning matches, and such like popular diversions,

with dancing and feasting thrown in of course, so naturally every soul in the place took a holiday with leave or without.

"Bishop Grant was an old man, though hale and hearty, but the sun had been very fierce, and he looked tired and hot as he began the solemn Benediction Service, called the Baptism of the Bells.

"Carefully he washed them all with salt water, dipped his finger into the oil for the anointing, which, ladies, you know preceded the dedication with the sign of the Cross, Latin benediction, and the final censing—all that is put down in order on that old document, only 'tis not easy to make out now.

"Well, he had just dipped his finger into the oil, when he gave a start and a gurgle, and fell down in a fit of apoplexy. The ringers—hemmed in by the crowd, excited by liberal potations, and altogether confused, thought from the movement amongst the bystanders the service was concluded, so gave the guiding ropes the required jerk, and the bells swung up into the belfry.

"That is how we tell the story now, and the bells have therefore never been consecrated, and 'tis not their fault if the Devil uses them now and again. The Bishop died, and if anyone ever thought of another service for the bells, no one stirred in the matter; and were it not for the date in the prepared chart being omitted, few would know there was a reason why our bells are not quite like others."

A modern bell on a sturdy hempen rope (whose tin-kettle, feeble clink could form no faintest comparison with the deep musical chime silent above its head), hung from a pent-house above the clock face, and jingled the villagers to church.

"Strangers often jeered, and said 'twas folly and worse to give in to such notions of superstition," the old man volunteered, but whilst the Manor House stood in the vale, with the weathercock with its golden initials turning in the wind, standing out clear against the sky, and Madam's little brass was visible, he was positive the tale of Madam's wanderings would remain.

Yes, oh! yes, we should have the whole story

as perfectly as he knew it, and with all due respect none could tell us more, seeing that his great, great, great, grandmother had been Madam's nurse; but he must ask our patience a little longer, as first he must beg us to look at the time-worn stone in a quiet corner of the small God's Acre, and note the deep-cut inscription to "Reginald Markham, Captain in the Parliamentary Army, who died in the Service of the Cause, 1659, at the Royalist Manor of Rithycombe."

Simple the words, plain the statement, and yet what a world of tragedy lay below!

That was the Rectory yonder, with the tall, thick hedges of yew and box, between which, in the shades of night, a lady's white-robed figure passed, with a silver lamp held high in her hand, intent on a secret search. It was broad daylight *now*, but up to the present day, no one who knew that tale of the past cared to wander alone after nightfall in the Rectory garden.

Neither was it to everyone the story of the place was told; strangers likely to scoff were often put off with careless remarks about "things" being

seen, and such like; few took the trouble to sift and enquire as to the origin of the spirit that walked—walked as truly as you or I, with flowing garments, and dark, steady eyes, looking —for ever looking for what it never found.

The story being really a true one, highly prized by the villagers, any ridicule thrown on the subject was greatly resented, and when did a spirit—call it wraith, ghost, or spook—what you will—appear before a mocker?

Matters had got to a fine pass in the last century, so far as the Manor itself was concerned; not a maid would remain beyond her hiring-time, and a certain dormer window, high up in the steep-pitched roof, could only now be used as an apple loft, because in the northern sense, it was never "alone."

"Had no one ever attempted to lay the uneasy spirit to rest, did you ask, ladies?

"Ay! indeed! more than one such endeavour had been made, only to prove a failure."

The first, the village wise-acres had organized themselves, using an old and infallible charm for

laying a ghost to rest. On Hallowe'en the whole place turned out, with seven men and seven maids, and an immense length of silken withes. Placing the cords in a double circle on the ground in the middle of the Rectory walk, full in the light of the silver moon, they waited with peering eyes and silent tongues, for the clock to strike the witching hour of twelve. All were on their oath to shut their eyes on the first stroke, or else the charm would fail. It came at last, with a "boom" on the silent night, and then both ends of the silken circles were drawn sharply together, with the object of enclosing the restless spirit; and the chosen men and maids pulling the ropes along, guided only by the blind fiddler, tramped away to the nearest pond, and flung the silken bonds well into the middle, where the water swirled speedily over them. Some declared they heard groans and sighs, others that the weight was awful; but the pond was in a dark corner, and all fled with their best foot foremost, and never willingly passed the place except in daylight.

After a short interval, the figures became

visible again, and then authorities declared someone must have peeped, that such a reliable cure should have failed. Finally, they consulted the Parson and implored his aid, and after hunting through various tomes, he promised to do what he could by a solemn Requiem service. Before that, he advised that a thorough search should be made for hidden treasure, for everyone knew that if valuables were secreted anywhere, the house would be haunted until all was found, when the wandering ones would rest in peace.

He made one of the search party himself, and when, after much tapping and banging, they *did* find a few jewels and a spoon hidden in the upright of an old carved bed, and a little secret panel in the dormer-room, empty of all but one thin coin that had crept into a crack, which prevented the spring snapping tight, else very likely no one would ever have found the cupboard out, it was such a splendid hiding place; but the coin bore silent witness to the fact that treasures had evidently been stored there at one time.

There was great exultation that now the

trouble would be ended without any further bother. But No! Again in the gloaming the ghosts passed—oftenest, but not always Madam alone, who remained watching from her dormer window until the broad light of day caused her gently to fade away.

Then the Rector tried his solemn service, held on a far distant hill with silken cords drawn duly all the way, to the measured chant of psalm and hymn. The torches flared around on the white-robed clergy and chorister boys, as in earnest, reverent tones the priest banned the wandering spirits by bell, book and candle, not to come nearer the Manor lands than by one cock's stride a year!

A solemn silence, and a great awe fell on the listening crowd, then a huge bonfire blazed redly up, on which with the sign of the Cross the silken ropes were laid, and all waited motionless till nothing but a heap of ashes remained. These the Rector scattered to the four winds, with a parting earnest prayer, that God in His great mercy would now allow these poor troubled

spirits to sleep quietly in His Almighty keeping, until the Resurrection morn.

Then the procession reformed and returned to their various homes, as the first red streaks glowed in the east.

"Did that answer, ladies, did you say?

"Ay, surely, and as long as the figure keeps her distance no one minds her walking, but 'tis many years agone, and so often has Madam now been seen again in the Rectory garden, 'tis certain in her cock's strides she is so far on her return to the Manor, for 'tis a bee-line from yon hill to the old house in the vale.

"When she reaches that, a new generation will exist, who will deal with the matter according to their lights, and probably pretend to scorn the means our fathers used!

"All right, Martha, woman, I'll be along directly. It is my missus, ladies, come to say our bit of dinner waits; maybe you'll like to give a glance round. Look in at the old Manor, see the screen and the window, and hear what Mrs. Collins has to say on the subject. Then, if I make not too

bold, and you still wish to hear the whole story, my missus will be proud to have a dish of tea ready for you, and I'll tell you all I know."

The offer was too tempting to refuse. We took the old man's advice, found all he had told us quite matter of fact, and spent most happily the rest of the afternoon in his sweet brown cottage, with its quaint corner cupboards and octagon-shaped rooms, listening to the ancient story of Madam's life and death.

Anyone who doubts what a vivid personality she possessed, has but to journey to that quiet Somersetshire village, and if they return unconvinced that there are more things in Heaven and Earth than our philosophy understands, then this story is not for them—headstrong, wilful sceptics!

To this day the spirit walks: no one will pass alone between the box-tree paths of the Rectory garden; the weathercock turns in the wind with all the initials in view, and fragrant apples strongly scent the dormer chamber, always called "Madam's Zimmer," wherein no doubt to those

whose ears are listening for it, the hum of a wheel can be heard in the stillness of the summer night, and were there eyes to see—a slender form and delicate fingers spinning the web of fate.

None of the old family remain. They have completely died out, only the ghost of a bygone day keeps faithful watch and ward!

* * * * * *

So far, only modified in language, and greatly altered in style, was the preface the old sexton gave us, of the story set forth in length in the following pages, interesting us so deeply as we stood on the actual spot, that it seemed likely others might like to hear the tale of what had given real rise to the haunting of the past and present, which it seems probable will still continue into the vast mysterious future.

Will the treasure ever be found? *Where* and by *whom?*—and if so, will the old man's surmise prove correct, and the ghosts visit no more that peaceful little village?—are questions Time and God's Providence will alone make plain.

In the Year of Grace 1659.

—•—

II.

MADAM'S ZIMMER.

"Nor think to village swains alone
Are these unearthly terrors known;
For not to rank nor sex confined
Is this vain ague of the mind:
Hearts firm as steel, as marble hard,
'Gainst faith, and love, and pity barred,
Have quaked, like aspen leaves in May,
Beneath its universal sway."

"*Rokeby.*"—SCOTT.

"BLESS my soul, *what* are we to be up to now?"

Squire Conyngham ran his hand through his scanty grey hair in grievous perplexity, the effect of which was, of course, to make it stand up in a kind of halo round his fine old head. The summer sun was shining in all its power through the open window of the Manor dining-room, bringing out a few dabs of colour from the faded rugs strewn over the polished boards. Great jars

of oriental pottery held sweet treasures from the walled flower-garden, and a beautiful bowl of roses flanked a corresponding one of cream on the soft damask table-cloth. A rich old carved screen extended the entire width of the room at the bottom end, leaving a passage way behind from door to door.

The outside of the house was gabled and most artistic, with latticed casements and deep-set eaves. The once bright red tiles, toned to a rich brown crimson, that showed picturesquely through the various greens of the trees between the tiny church and the small hamlet over which Squire Conyngham held sway.

High above one pointed end a quaint old weathercock formed of the initial letters "B. C." on two points, and the date "16" and "40," on the two others, turned with the wind.

A few miles off and several market towns were within reach, and from any of the rising hills a good view of the sea itself was to be obtained, with the queer old weather-beaten pier itself, on which on stormy nights the Whistling Witch held wild

revel, and with her high-pitched notes distinct and clear above the tempest's din, lured and enticed unwary mariners to their death. Huddled in a heap in her dark mantle, the Siren would laugh in mad glee as she saw the wandering lights, with their baneful gleam shining clearly out from dangerous rocks and cruel reefs, as the wreckers followed her evil example and made ready for their wicked work.

Smugglers, too, had a home of their own amongst the many caves, and lively times were those when the Excise men and the freebooters had a tussle together. The country people were so often mixed up in the contraband trade, it was greatly to their interest to hide and help the reckless desperadoes; and surely few counties could give them better vantage ground than the highly superstitious one of Somerset, with its steep hills, deep vales, and dark, lonely lanes that rivalled Devonshire itself in their narrowness and wild luxuriance. A mere handful of men could guard and keep one of these winding ways against heavy odds, as was often proved when the "boys" were out.

Just now the whole country-side was in an uproar in the disturbed period that ensued before Charles II. gained his father's throne. Everyone was fighting-mad, some even in ignorance of what they were struggling for; and utterly dependent on the news-monger's own views on the subject, they frequently got rather confused as to the rights or wrongs of the subject under discussion.

On those rare occasions when a silk-tied packet arrived post haste for the Squire, there were sure to be a few loiterers handy to the porch door on the chance of picking up a few scraps of news or gossip. The jovial old man was not one to keep information to himself in those stirring times, and few went away on such days without gaining their object. There was always the plea of wanting Mistress Bridget to write a letter for them, should the curious stumble against Madam, who was all for keeping herself to herself, and therefore, by no means a popular person.

So stood the picture on that sunny day of summer, when through the village had galloped, on a smoking horse, the bearer of the letter that

plunged in one moment the Squire and his family into a sea of perplexity, and broke up for ever their happy home life.

"What is the matter, John? You keep us quite in the dark—what has chanced to startle you so?"

"And you too, my lady, for hearken! Eliza lies at death's door, and prays without ceasing to see me once again. Thomas says I have not a moment to lose; immediately on receipt of his tidings, sent by his quickest messenger, I must start at once, not alone, he trusts, for Eliza would dearly love to bid you farewell; but that they leave to us, for Bridget has to be considered. He adds a warning that the roads are none too safe. I had best not forget pistols, but beyond and above everything, to remember time is life! There now, wife, do you wonder I called out?"

"Not in the least; I should have, in your shoes, but now we must be off at once. Will you order the horses, and ask Richard to see the pillion saddle is buckled on better than last time we rode, when it was so loose it kept on sliding, and took the skin from poor Jenny's back? Richard will

have to get ready also, for he must ride the pack-horse; and, Bridget, will you come and help me with the valise?"

"Then I am not to go, mother?"

"To go, child! Who ever thought of such a thing, in these unsettled times? You are far safer at home, where none will harm you. We only take Richard, really for fear of any mischance to Jenny, when we should go forward on Lucifer, and he would bring the mare back. Supposing we thought of your going, you must ride pillion behind him, and then, if Jenny cast a shoe, or went lame, what in the world could we do with you?"

"I understand, mother. Then I remain here?"

"Why, of course, Bridget. I leave you in charge; if Martha had not got married last week, she would have taken care of you: indeed, anyhow, I wish you to send her word she will be conferring a great favour upon me if she and old Joe will come up here and stay during our absence. It will be company for you, and the maidens are too flighty for my taste. There is another matter

I wish we had seen to, and that is the hiding of your father's prize-money, and the bits of plate he sets such store on. We have been meaning to do it any day for months, and now it will have to be left to chance, unless indeed, Bridget, you can manage it yourself. If you do, tell no one where you put it, and be a steady lass, and not afraid. Now, child, there's your father calling. Give me my hood and mittens, and send Richard up for the valise. If only James was at home!"

Never once did the idea strike Madam of remaining at home with her daughter; in every thought or action her husband came first. So many happy years had sped in the quiet Manor home before the little daughter's arrival some twenty years ago, that for her to step between the devoted couple could never be. They were all in all to each other, and she was a most precious treasure to both. Certainly she favoured her mother mostly, and the villagers spoke in awe of her great learning. Few of them could read a word, and therefore her most ordinary knowledge grew into something peculiar.

The adieux were very brief. A great longing to go with them seized on Bridget's heart as her father folded her warmly in his loving arms, and tears were very near when her mother kissed and blessed her. There was nothing for it, however, but to gulp down the choking sobs and wipe the tear-dimmed eyes, in time to give them a parting wave before the whispering avenue trees hid the last glimpse of the riders.

Then she donned her hood and kerchief, and started off to Martha's cottage, burdened with her mother's message, which she felt bound to deliver in person. Her nurse Martha had begun her married life in the keeper's cottage across the common northwards; quite a good step away, and a lonely path. *That* was nothing uncommon thereabouts, however, and it was but a pleaeant walk in summer-time.

Martha was busy washing, and her hands were covered with soap suds, as, all in a hurry and a flurry, she hastened to throw wide the gate on catching a glimpse of her nursling approaching.

Her greeting was very warm, but her face fell when she heard of Madam's wish.

"There now! Did ever anything happen more contrary?" she cried. "'Tis but last night Joe settled with Captain Fosbrook, up at the Grange, for us to take charge of the place during his visit to London, and he starts to-morrow for an indefinite period. Only that Joe was married, he would not have had him at all, but very likely he can get someone else to do for him just as well; and Mistress Bridget, my child, I need not tell you we'll come and take care of you with all the pleasure in life. Ay! and there are troubles ahead, if my old man speaks truth; but don't you be afeard, we'll look after you all right. I'll go at once and find Joe, and we'll be up with you long afore dark."

Bridget sauntered slowly homewards, hardly noticing how the bright sun had clouded over, and what heavy clouds were coming up before the wind.

The villagers were principally at their cottage doors, which were frequently decorated with yellow oil-skin coats freshly greased.

She entered the tiny church with its tremendously thick walls, and sunken windows, with just sufficient forms for the village proper, and carved work on the choir stalls. Tired with her hot walk, she sank into her accustomed seat and fell into a doze. Outside the ivy creaked and tapped impatiently against the window, but it was a long, dismal howl that roused her up from an unpleasant dream at last; then a cautious black nose came pushing the old narrow door open, there was a joyous bound on to her lap, and a little hot tongue began licking her hand.

"Why, Rough, how came you here? I would not take you with me, the sun was too fierce, and I thought you sound asleep. Well, now we must be off, or the storm will overtake us."

One long, lingering glance round the familiar building, and the two set off on their return home.

With colour heightened and hair blown wild Bridget looked the picture of health, as she passed up the stately avenue and crossed the velvet lawn. There was a sound of loud talking as she approached the door, and the three maids were

standing in a group, but on seeing her, came rushing forward, all speaking at once. When she could make sense of their remarks she made out that, taking advantage of their mistress's absence, they had been gossiping busily with the villagers, when all of a sudden a band of soldiers had ridden through without drawing bridle, and looking stern and fierce.

Roundheads, of course, but what the errand that took them through the quiet village who could say? Hard upon their heels, only with jaded steeds and dusty garments, passed a company of Royalists, who yet had time for a jest and a word, and seemed reckless and wild in the extreme.

Frightened, in spite of themselves, by the bold glances and random words, the maids had come running home, heedless and careless of the fact that several pairs of keen eyes noticed the direction they took, and promised a speedy return.

Now what did Mistress Bridget wish them to be at? Was it safe for them to remain?

"Safe!" and the young voice had a keen edge of

scorn. "What was it they feared?—who would hurt them?"

One maid nudged the other to speak, and then all began at once.

Had she forgotten, maybe, that each time soldiers had been seen about, tales of pillage and robbery had leaked out, whilst rough words and rougher deeds had abounded? Truly, so far they had escaped wonderfully, but perhaps it was their turn now. Would it not be better to fly whilst there was time?

"The Royalists will not harm us; we shall be pleased to treat them well, and the Roundheads may never come; so why be scared at shadows?"

The maids withdrew muttering audibly, and Bridget watered her flowers, and tidied her mother's room. All in a minute her dream in the old parish church came clearly back into her mind. The dread of it had been on her when Rough's tongue had awoke her.

She had hidden the treasure in secret, and then a great crowd came round the house, shrieking and shouting strange words, whilst they piled up

faggots in the courtyard round a stake, to which a figure dressed in her cloak was led out; but the form faded away as she looked, and a dog's eager bark sounded near.

Nothing more could she remember, only such a horror and trouble, it seemed too heavy a burden. If only she had stayed awake, her nerves would not have been all in a quiver, as bad as the foolish maidens.

One thing she could, and would do, before daylight faded, and that was, hide the money where no strange person would think of looking. Quietly she lifted her mother's heavy châtelaine, and passed into her father's dressing-closet, where in an iron-clamped box, the family treasures were kept.

He had done good service to his country as a young man, and, in spite of his wife's wishes, had always kept his prize-money by him. Even when parting with most of his handsome plate, to aid the martyred King's cause, he never would touch a sovereign of that bright pile of gold. It was the child's dowry, he said—the best he could do for

her, and neither for King nor country would he rob his little maid.

Only a few thick mugs, old-time spoons, and quaint snuff-boxes, with a battered salver, were kept in the house, besides a certain amount in daily use. The best had been melted down for the King, so that Bridget had only one journey to make to carry her treasures away. Up the wide old stairs she went, two flights, and along the narrow passage that led to her gabled room (immediately under the glittering weathercock proudly bearing her initials aloft, put up in honour of her birth), with a view from the casement surpassed by none in the house.

Deciding in her own mind that the recess seen in her dream was as good a secret hiding-place as she should find, she decided to use it for the present. It was in her mantel-piece, simply an old-fashioned oak one, that had never struck her as possessing any individuality.

She felt it carefully all over; it seemed solid and ugly, with no carvings to hide springs, or knobs to press to open cupboards. Once, twice,

she failed, and then she sat down in front of the fire-place, and gazed fixedly at the simple shelf, supported by brackets with plain wooden jambs, that baffled her completely. It was the frieze *below* the shelf that ought to move, if there was any truth in that queer dream of hers. Deliberately she rose, and going to the side of the chimney, pushed against the wooden jamb with all her might.

Quite useless! It would not move! Hot and tired from her exertions, Bridget was in two minds as to whether to try again. Hating to be baffled, she went round to the other side, and pushed the frieze from there.

It gave way! Very slightly, most unwillingly it moved a trifle; then after a more vigorous push, slid well aside, leaving visible a carefully-made cupboard behind it, in which lay a queer old book, with brass clasps and mountings, and yellow leaves, covered with faded writing.

True daughter of Eve as she was, Bridget seized the book, opened the time-stiffened fastenings, and gazed eagerly within. Full of cookery recipes at

first sight, and then concoctions of herbs and simples for wounds and bruises, love philtres, charms for man and beast, evil spells minutely described, poisons of deadly effect and untraceable origin, with their antidotes marked against each—the pages in that hurried glance seemed strangely to fascinate her, and it was regretfully she closed the book at last, determined to study it at leisure.

Why it should be hidden there she could not guess, and hardly troubled to think just now; the fact that the treasure would be secure was the great thing that mattered. There was plenty of room and to spare, and a safer receptacle could hardly have been found, to her thinking. The frieze slid back again behind the brackets, leaving not the faintest trace. The designer had done his work well, whoever he might have been.

Lost in thought, Bridget stood gazing from her window out over the tall tree-tops swaying in the summer breeze, to the misty, distant hills behind which the silver sea rippled and danced in glee. How she loved her home! she felt as if she *could* not live elsewhere, she would rather die than leave.

A hurried step on the stair, a nervous knock at the door, warned her she had other things to do that brooked no delay. The time for musing was not yet, action must come first. Part of her morning's dream had so far stood her in good stead. What of the other and darker half?—the memory of which alone brought a sound of crackling wood in her ears, and a wild red light before her eyes!

Bridget shivered as she crossed the floor and flung wide the door.

"Please, Mistress Bridget, Martha is below, in a terrible taking, wanting to see you at once. Can you come?"

"Surely," and the dainty high-heeled shoes tripped lightly down the shallow stairs.

"Oh! Mistress Bridget, my dear, did you ever hear tell of such bad luck? Captain Fosbrook had started for London when my Joe got to the Grange, and had left a message for us to say he had been called away suddenly, and had every confidence in us. Joe says we must keep our word, sorry though he is at disappointing you, but

if you feel nervous and frightened, suppose you come up to the Grange along of us? Not but what I believe you are safe enough anywhere. I should dearly like to have you, child, all the same, and the idea of harm coming to you just makes my flesh creep."

"Oh! No! thank you, Nursie dear. I am really not afraid, only mother said I was to ask you, and I have a bit of spinning in my mind to do as a surprise against her return, so shall have no time to think I am lonely or dull."

"Suppose Joe's brother Timothy sleeps here during the master's absence; he's a good lad and trustworthy, with all his wits about him. Give him my old room, dearie, and then I shall sleep in peace. Now do, honey, just to please me!"

"I don't mind, Martha, one way or the other, but I expect the maids will feel happier for knowing there is a man on the spot. So please ask him to come and take care of us."

"That I will. I'll go at once, and just you make him of use, my dear, now mind."

III.

OUT IN THE NIGHT.

"Scorn the whispers of fear;
Be righteous, and bravely bide on."
—WAUGH.

AFTER that topsy-turvy day things settled down wonderfully for a bit; then ugly rumours reached even Bridget's ears of cruelty and wrong done to innocent people.

Some argued all was fair in love and war, others declared when hot blood caught fire, who stopped to count the cost?

Troops of reckless soldiers seemed everywhere, and bands of private robbers often finished in brutal fashion what the soldiers began. Incendiary fires lit up the darkness of many a night, sending a spasm of fear and dread through timid, anxious hearts, as the fiery sparks and crimson glow warned them *their* turn might come next.

Several times dead bodies were found in unexpected places. One day this happened in

the Manor avenue, and the maids, scared and frightened almost out of their wits, declared it was a warning only the foolish would neglect, packed their trunks in haste, and leaving them for the next carrier to call for, departed forthwith to their homes. In such a panic for their own safety, they could not spare even a thought for the young and beautiful girl they left behind.

It was Timothy who told Bridget of their flight as the evening shadows grew long round the old timbered house, and then in silence he stood before her, twisting his soft hat in his hands with a troubled look on his rugged face, waiting for his slow words to come.

"Will you let me see you to the Grange, mistress? There may be rough work here before long, not good for maids to see!"

"And what about you, Tim?"

"I thought maybe you'd trust me to do my best. No harm shall come nigh the place that I can help, and I shall be all the freer, having no petticoats to look after."

"I can't do it, Timothy, really. I should not

have a moment's peace, and if harm befell you, I should always fancy at least I might have helped you somehow. Now please let us lock up the house before it gets quite dark, and then we can settle what is best to do. *Is* it my fancy, or is there distant shouting? It sounds like tipsy men!"

"I hoped you would not notice it, mistress; the inns have been crowded all day, and this is the outcome. Also a riotous lot of soldiers rode in awhile ago, ripe for any mischief."

The light faded slowly, the stars came glimmering out, and night drew on apace. Bridget sat in the silent hall, listening to the song of the clock and Rough's loud breathing, as he lay asleep in his mistress's lap.

In the kitchen hard by Timothy smoked over the open hearth, with his honest face a mass of puckers, as he thought on his difficult post. Loaded pistols lay at his elbows, and a great knotted club leant against his knees. At last, what he had been waiting for came to pass—the sound of horses trotting and a heavy tramp of feet.

Shouts and cries, and bits of songs heralded the approach of a lawless band in the calm silence of the night.

Quietly the man arose, put his pistols into his pockets, and, grasping his stout stick, walked into the hall.

Bridget had risen to her feet, and was standing listening, still clasping Rough in her protecting arms.

"They are coming, mistress."

A nod was his only answer, as the girl listened intently. Then came a banging on the door, and shouts to open, or an entrance would be forced!

Rough oaths were largely interspersed, and voices broken by hiccoughs grew threatening in their tones as no answer came.

The door was giving on its hinges when Bridget found her voice, and asked Timothy to throw it back and enquire what they wanted. Very unwillingly he complied, blocking the entrance with his body as well as he could.

"Your pleasure, sirs?"

"Riches for the Royalists!" shouted some.

"Wages for the Army!" yelled others. "Treasure, treasure!" howled those who cared little for either.

Then a sudden rush was made, and Timothy was ousted from his post. Plunder certainly seemed the chief object of the visit by the way the things were seized on and hurled outside, and many a mocking jeer was pointed at the girl who stood motionless looking on.

Timothy was terribly knocked about, and soon lay a helpless heap on the floor, and Bridget made out the place was to be fired when emptied of all they required; but that would not be to-night, as they had another job on hand that would not keep as well as *this* one, which they had simply taken *en route*. So with oaths and laughs, telling her to expect them to-morrow, the rabble followed the blustering soldiers out of the desolate home, under the lofty avenue, down the narrow lanes.

Bridget waited, listening intently, until silence reigned again, when she stooped over Timothy and tried to discern his injuries. The moon shining calmly through the open door, with the

peaceful stars around her, gave plenty of light to see the confusion and disorder all about and around; and also showed, to her untold relief, that her faithful henchman's eyes were wide open and clear.

"Where are you hurt, Tim, poor fellow? Can you tell me?"

"I think, mistress, 'tis mostly bruises; they pounded me well-nigh to a jelly, and in falling I suppose I hit my head, and it stunned me for a bit. Now, my lady, we've no time to lose. Can you go for help? If Joe would give me his arm, I could crawl to a place of safety; and *you* must not be here when they return. You say they have gone further afield, probably to Marshfields, where the old miser lives. Then *now* is our chance, if your heart is brave enough, and if not, then God help us!"

And the honest fellow groaned in anguish at his helplessness.

"What am I to do, Tim?"

"Start at once for the Grange, and send Joe back to me, but for the love of Heaven return

not yourself; the moon will have set, and the roads no fit place for you."

Bravely the poor fellow smothered his groans until out into the now silent night his mistress stepped, and with feet that would falter, and heart that would flutter, started away over the lonely common in search of aid for both.

Rough ran close beside her, and his companionship did great things for the trembling girl. Never had the common looked so wild, or the hollows cast such shadows.

Suppose she met the ghostly three that nightly walked and watched on the edge of the disused chalk pit, or what if the Wild Huntsman galloped by, with all his pack behind him? Surely, surely, she should die of fright!

Well she knew no maid of theirs would willingly pass down their own avenue after dark, though what they expected or feared to see they would not say; and now, here she was, alone on the wild Somersetshire moor, without a creature near, and with countless fancies taking shape and form in the over-excitement of her brain. Again and again

she glanced nervously behind her, and watched Rough's ears in an agony of fear; if they pricked up, then something must be near!

Up they went in sudden straightness, and out came a quick, short, warning bark. Over the hill in front came riding a troop of men, and by the moon's silver light on their weapons Bridget made out they were soldiers. Alas! alas! Then she was too late to save poor Tim. Useless to hurry on, or try to hide, where concealment amongst the short heather was impossible. As well meet her fate now, as later.

As they came riding nearer, Bridget saw this was no disorderly band, but men riding steadily with an officer at their head.

That it was the hated Roundheads she also noted at a glance; the next moment a sharp word of command rang forth, and all came to a sudden halt.

"Who goes there?" came the challenge. "Friend or foe?"

Trembling greatly, Bridget stepped forward to the centre of the red road, where the moonlight fell

full upon her, and lifted her white face to the captain's.

"A woman, and out at this hour! Mistress, you should be at home. *What* is it you say? Help! That you want help? From what, may I ask you? Rest assured I will do what I can to aid you if you will explain the matter."

As briefly and steadily as her faltering tongue would allow, Bridget explained what had occurred, and the soldier's brow grew very dark as he listened to her tale. Half his troop he sent off at once to Marshfields, with strict orders to avoid bloodshed, if possible, but to secure the ringleaders; and with the rest he escorted Bridget home. Placing her on his own horse, he walked beside her at a quick pace, keeping his hand on the bridle all the time, for he saw how shaken she was, and the horse was not used to a lady.

Rough was quite content to run alongside, and if the troopers wondered at their errand, they were too well accustomed to obey orders to trouble their heads at the why and wherefore. Poor Tim's heart sank very low as he heard the soldiers dis-

mounting, and he could hardly believe he saw aright when Bridget and the captain came in together. He was nearly black and blue by then from his bruises, some of which were greatly inflamed.

The captain proposed to leave a few men as guard, whilst he, with the rest, pushed on to Marshfields. He must be prompt, he said, or his regular work would be thrown out, and, of course, his time was not his own. He promised faithfully to return, and said he would consider very carefully in the meantime what could best be done. The whole country was so unsettled, it was absurd to look on one place as safer than another. Hordes of wild soldiers on both sides were swarming everywhere. The force of arms was the only power that prevailed.

He spoke very quietly, so as not to frighten the girl, and seemed greatly distressed at her friendless condition. He rode away as speedily as might be, and Bridget, assisted by a compassionate soldier, did her best to make Timothy more comfortable.

The night passed over, and in the clear morning

light the Roundhead captain rode again to the door.

Very grave did he look as he told his anxious listeners that horrible deeds had taken place before *his* men reached the lonely miser's house, and the Royalist soldiers had ridden off before their arrival. The old man had been murdered, and terrible pillage done after the red-coats had departed with all the portable valuables they could lade themselves with, but as the darkness passed a sullen shame had fallen on the rabble of peasants, and they had slunk away like beaten curs, cowards in very truth, in the pure light of day!

He had but waited to give what little help he could to the frightened family at Marshfields, and then rode his best to reach the Manor.

"Now, mistress, I have here a signed safety warrant for my own family, given me by the Parliament in recognition of my services. I am on oath only to use it for them, so cannot give it to *you*, unless my poor scheme seems at all possible to you."

He spoke very softly as he drew her gently into

the quaint bay window, whilst he finished his tale of sorrow and bloodshed.

"I am but a rough soldier; my tongue is not used to fine phrases, fit for a dainty lady's ears. One day, maybe to-day, a pistol shot or a sword slash will finish me. Very likely you may never see me more, but as the only protection I can give you, to shield you in the present and the future, will you consent now—at once—to marry me, a poor but honest man, with a whole heart at your service, and a strong and willing arm to protect and help you as long as life shall last? It is but a rough wooing, well I know, but what else can I do? If you but grant my humble prayer, then the signed warrant will hold you sacred from my side, and I can leave *my wife* a guard to protect her from all else, should need arise. The Grange is burnt to the ground. I rode that way to enquire if your trusted nurse could come to you, but no one knows where she has gone. To leave you here unprotected, without a woman by you, is an awful thought, and yet I am so pressed for time I know not what to do if you say me Nay.

Indeed, mistress, I would treat you well, and my mother longs for a daughter."

Bridget looked at the face bending over her, at the smile in the eyes, and the look of self-reliance in the mouth, and made her decision on the moment.

"I will be your true and faithful wife, sir. God bless you for your thought and care for me. Few would have troubled what became of an enemy's daughter. Civil wars make hard hearts."

"When a man has it in his power to help and shield a brave woman, believe me, mistress, he counts it high honour, side with whom she may. It is truly no time for forms and ceremonies, yet even I, Roundhead as I am, do not go the lengths that some do, and though I would not willingly break any law, yet I would fain have the Church's blessing rest on us. I sometimes think the day is not far distant when I would gladly turn my sword into a ploughshare, so sick and tired am I of endless petty quarrels and jealousies even amongst our generals. Had Henry Cromwell been the senior to meek, gentle, easily-frightened

Richard, the reins of power and direction would not have slipped like waxed ropes through *his* fingers, judging by the tact he has displayed in Ireland. Is there anyone here, either who has taken the oath of agreement or not, who would run the risk of uniting us, now at once?"

"In this quiet spot, sir, our own old Rector lives unmolested at the Rectory and has held his services much as usual. The people love him, and until lately we have had no agitators to stir up tumults amongst us; but my faithful servant, Timothy, told me but yester-morn that Dunstar, our nearest town, is in a state of terrible excitement, and riotous meetings have been held in the market place, the clergy prohibited from entering the church, and virtually imprisoned in their own houses. So that before long we may be in the same case. Will not marrying me bring you into trouble with the Parliament?"

"That I will gladly risk if we can manage the business anyhow. My troop have served under me well, and would, I fancy, hardly care to play informers; and by the time the idea had entered into

their heads of making any disturbance, the deed would be done. But I must warn you of the heavy penalty strictly enforced for using the so-called Common Prayer Book, which might fall heavily on your old friend at the Rectory."

"No, sir, that cannot touch him; he is very nearly blind from specks in his eyes, and years ago learnt the services he required off by heart, to our great advantage these last few years."

"Well! that is good for us; many of the best of your clergy have done, and are doing the same, so that their people should yet have the comfort of their familiar prayers, even if in a modified form."

"And you a Roundhead, sir, to speak so moderately!—you puzzle me!"

"Ay, mistress, but my mother is a Royalist, and mainly for that reason I procured the safety warrant I shall leave with you; and for her sweet sake, I trust my zeal, in what I believe to be the righteous cause, will never turn me into a fanatic. There are many moderate men like myself, serving in the Parliamentary army, quite as wide awake to our shortcomings as any Royalist can be; but a

truce to such outside matters, a soldier's first duty is to obey. Now I must to your village pastor, and see if he will help us. Kindly tell me how best to find him, and will you of your charity make your own way, with two of my fellows for witnesses, to the little parish church hard by, in half an hour? Nay! look not so slightingly at your dress, it is all that I could wish; a fairer maid I ne'er beheld."

"One moment, sir, I pray you! Should my parents object to this sudden action of mine, will it cause you aught of trouble?"

"They will *not* object when I explain my motives fully, and my reasons for what seems, I grant you, like hot haste. Nay, more, they will understand no other course was open to me, on my honour as a gentleman. And now, farewell! time flies!"

With quick strides the soldier disappeared from Bridget's view. No fear but what she watched him out of sight; as goodly a man to look on, as would be found in a long day's ride. Ere long he passed up between the high-clipped laurel hedges that bordered the Rectory gravel drive, and knocked on the porch door, half hidden in its bower of roses.

A night-capped head peered forth, with ideas of infant baptism required, put swiftly to flight by the soldier's brief words. Then came a hurried tumbling into the best Sunday-suit, a stock very much under one ear, and an old, old man shambled side by side of the young one, down to the tiny church across the road.

A smaller party was not possible for legality's sake, than just those few men and the girl, who looked a winsome bride indeed, in the simple white muslin dress she had found time to put on, to do honour to the brave soldier, whose smile of thanks and whispered words of approval fell softly on her ear as he led her up the church; whilst the Rector shuffled helplessly into his smocked surplice wrong side foremost, with no watchful clerk to put him straight.

Quietly, but very reverently was the service said in the early summer morn. The soldier placed on Bridget's finger his own signet ring, all too large for her small hand, and did not again loose his clasp until they stood in the old vestry to sign the register. Then he wrote a few lines swiftly, which

also he called on his men to witness as his will, and filled in the Parliamentary warrant in all due form. Well under half an hour, and all was finished.

At the church door, when the pair came out, all the captain's troop were drawn up in order, and of their own accord, after saluting him, each man respectfully did the same to his bride, who went from red to white, and back again, as she recognised the hour of loneliness had indeed returned. How should she bear it again?

Clearly, coolly, did Captain Markham detail the men for the special duty of guarding his wife—how proudly he said the words!—and then in sight of all, stooped, bareheaded, and kissed her on the lips; sprang briskly into his saddle, gave the quick order to trot, and was out of sight before Bridget quite took in what had happened. The old priest offered her his arm, and respecting her silence, walked quietly homewards, whilst the few specially-selected soldiers walked their horses behind.

Timothy's unfeigned satisfaction at what had taken place did more to rouse Bridget from her musings than aught else; and after she had

attended to him, she went up to her own old chamber, and stood for hours gazing out of the latticed window along the winding road over the hills the soldiers had taken that morning.

No hum of her spinning wheel vibrated that day on the clear air, and when she went to her rest, her simple robe was laid with unusual care aside, to wait for another gladsome day that should see a simple, honest man return in peace and love!

Ay! wrap it up with every care, and strew sweet lavender around, to set rust and moth at defiance, but never more will you robe yourself, fair lady, in its soft folds, or look again as you looked erewhile in that tiny village church.

A few peaceful days followed, during which Timothy made good progress, and quiet returned to the village. It was but the lull before another storm!

Disorderly bands of soldiers came frequently sweeping by; some, warned by the sight of the soldier-guard at the Manor House, passed on their way with jeers; others, those of the Roundhead persuasion, respected the safety warrant; but one

rampageous lot, fired with the thought of treasure, outnumbered the slender garrison, killed two, wounded more, and ransacked the place from attic to cellar. Even Madam's chamber was not respected, but underwent the most searching scrutiny of any. Flooring was pulled up, walls tapped, backs of cupboards wrenched down, and the chimney fired up all in vain—not a coin could be found. Savage and disappointed, at length the lawless lot rode off.

In those previous quiet days Bridget had studied attentively that quaint old mystic book, and hearing the soldiers had been very brutal in their conduct to the villagers, went down to offer her aid.

Was it shame at their past behaviour that caused such glowering eyes and sullen murmurs to reach her on all sides? Mothers snatched children hastily out of her sight, and once she caught a murmur of "Bewitched—the evil eye!" that only made her smile. She called on the old clergyman, and found him in such a shipwrecked condition after the soldiers' rough visit that she obliged him

to return with her, on the plea his company would be a protection.

And so the hours sped, and the shadows lengthened.

One day a letter came from her absent parents, full of regret and alarm for her, and saying how thankful they were to have come alone, for the country round her uncle's place was like a volcano —no peace nor rest for man or beast. Her aunt still lingered on—every day the end seemed imminent, and then would come a rally, and hopes of recovery quickly revived. With so many counties in open revolt, any prospect of their return seemed far distant, and the Squire himself was so ailing, he was not fit for the journey, had all been plain sailing. It was often the way with twins, she added; if one was ill, the other surely ailed. Bridget might rely on her sending as frequent tidings as could be managed. Their hearts were full of her!

Timothy was out and about again when Martha and her husband walked quietly in, and took possession of the kitchen. After doing their

utmost to save the Grange for Captain Fosbrook, they had, under cover of the confusion and darkness, escaped to the shelter of the woods, and remained there until all danger to themselves was past—then came straight to the Manor.

Timothy at once offered to go home, but Madam Bridget had learnt to rely on him so thoroughly that she would not entertain such an idea for a moment, and two trustworthy men were none too much for a household in such troublous days.

One morning Tim came in with a very long face, and said he had heard a rumour in the village that there was expected to take place in a day or so, a great organised Royalist rising, only a few miles off, to meet which, on the other side, General Lambert and a strong force were coming from London.

Bridget's heart beat very fast. Would her soldier husband be in the thick of the fight—should she see him first—and what if he fell?

Day by day, for hours together, she watched that winding road from her dormer window, until her eyes ached with the strain, and her brain

wearied with the suspense. Except for her visits to the village on errands of mercy, and the morning tendance of her mother's pensioners, accustomed to come at a certain hour to the servants' hall, every thought was occupied with the coming fight.

Young and enquiring, she tried some of the simples and recipes mentioned in the little old book, and found them more efficacious than her mother's usual remedies. Encouraged by this success, her belief in the book grew, and in one or two cases of fever she ventured to treat the children by its directions, strong though the remedies seemed. Martha was too pleased to see her occupied with anything to mind what it was, and the villagers' opinion of her powers grew apace.

One morning, as she entered the hall, she saw a silk-tied paper lying inside the open door. The direction was firm and distinct, and the first time of seeing her new name in writing sent the blood in a flush to her white face. Only *one* hand could have penned *that*, and every letter was so carefully formed, it was evident that pleasure and pride had both taken part in doing so. With elaborate care

she untied the fastening and read the few brief words.

"Keep a brave heart, sweetheart, and farewell!"

How or when it had come none knew, but Bridget guessed it had been sent off on the eve of the fighting, and by now might be the last token from as brave a man as ever held a pen or used a sword.

Every possible minute of that weary day found her watching from her window, whilst memory retraced those few brief hours of her wedding-day that had fenced her round with a strong man's watchful guard; and fancy sped ahead, picturing a manly form laid low, and a loving hand and heart cold with the chill of death.

Timothy had gone off somewhere long before she had awoke that morning, she felt no shadow of doubt to do her service, in some faithful fashion or other.

It was a perfect day, with a heat haze hanging over the blue hills; too hot, almost, for even the buzzing insect life to keep awake, and the flowers in the garden looked quite faint and languid.

Was ever day so long!

The shadows lengthened steadily, the birds awoke and sang their evening hymn, and with the prospect of a heavy dew ere long, the roses lifted their heavy, perfumed heads, and reigned supreme once more.

Over the crest of the nearest hill through the mist of warm vapour, surrounded by clouds of dust, rode a few horsemen slowly. Then one detached himself from the others, and urged his jaded steed to a quicker pace down the winding, deep red road, straight for the Manor gates.

Bridget knew then, in one swift moment, that she had need of all her courage to meet the news so near. Timothy was coming to tell her as gently as he could that her soldier was dead. Dead in the path of his duty; dead in the prime of his life!

Calm and white she turned and left the room, whilst another thought sprang into life; if her great fear was true, surely, oh! most surely, there would have been a bier! Her faithful comrade would never dare to face her if *that* had been left

behind on a field of sackage. If *he* was not still alive, why came these soldiers here?

Down with speed to the entrance door, a few hurried words to Martha in passing—for a room to be opened, and a bed made—and then another pause of anxious waiting, broken at last by Timothy's voice as he stood close beside her.

"The captain is here, madam. It was his greatest wish, though the doctor said it was an awful risk, with such a wound! He *is* alive, thank God, and that is more than we expected when we started, but once the doctor told him it was only a question of hours, no chance would be thrown away by coming, he would set off at once. Lambert has won; the Royalists' losses are very heavy, and they are utterly routed. Take courage, madam, for *his* sake."

Slowly the horsemen came on, one riding behind his officer, holding him up in his arms. So weak, so white, so helpless, that they had to lift him like a baby, and lay him down full length on the polished floor of the hall. Bridget feared he was dead as he lay with his head upon her lap, but

when a strong cordial had been given him, the eyes opened bright and clear, and a smile that was not of earth stole over the quiet face.

Involuntarily and swiftly the troopers bared their heads, whilst Martha and Timothy sank on their knees.

There was a convulsive quiver all over the recumbent figure, one feeble, faltering word—"Sweetheart!" and Reginald Markham, brave man and true, lay numbered with the dead.

When they came to undress him, and robe him for the grave, they found the bandages had slipped on the ride, and his clothes were simply soaked in blood.

Timothy was very clear that the doctor had said *nothing* could save him, when Bridget, with hands clasped and quivering lips, had grieved over that awful ride. How gladly would she have gone to him, had there been time, only just *that* was wanting. Timothy had not arrived until the fight was really over, and the victorious army in pursuit of the flying Royalists. Most fortunately, he had speedily fallen in with some of Captain Markham's

troop searching the ground where they had noticed their leader fall in the thickest of the fight! Amongst the many riderless steeds wandering over the field of carnage, one weary beast stood still, with drooping head and relaxed limbs, who whinnied every now and then in a hopeless, melancholy fashion that speedily attracted the soldiers' ears.

It was Sultan, the captain's charger, cut and bruised not a little, with his coat all clotted with dust and blood—not his own! Captain Markham was clear enough then to pray them to take him at once to the Manor, and it was not until they had seen the hastily-summoned doctor's grave shake of the head, that they had realized the gravity of the case.

Very quietly he was laid to rest in a sunny corner of the old graveyard a day or two after his death, and only her altered name and the signet-ring remained to remind Bridget, if she needed it, of the romance of her life. His will left all he possessed to her, but in such unsettled times no steps could be taken to claim her rights.

IV.

CAUTION.

"There's a track upon the deep, and a path across the sea;
But the weary ne'er return to their ain countrie."

—GILFILLAN.

"HEIGH-HO! It is a weary world, nothing but trouble and sorrow from the cradle to the grave!"

Half under his breath the words came from Squire Conyngham's lips as he stood in the autumn sunshine, with hands folded on his thick stick, and his keen clear eyes fixed wistfully on the far distant hills, beyond which lay the home he loved so well. Beside him stood his wife, trying with all her might *not* to see how sadly the fine old man had wasted away in the last few weeks. His twin sister's illness seemed really some ill-defined and happily rare form of consumption. Some days she was so wonderfully better, all felt hopeful; others so bad the end appeared imminent.

Any hint as to her brother's departure was sure

to bring on an exhausting attack, so that it seemed absolute cruelty to the Squire and his wife to insist on returning home, though they were really not required to assist at Ellesmere. There were plenty to do the little possible for the invalid.

Openly to herself Madam Conyngham owned the relief it would be when they could leave, for without their usual occupations both felt lost and dull. Madam perhaps in particular; hers was such an active nature, busy from morning until night indoors and out.

The memory that the brother and sister had been such veritable twins, rare then as now, and the old doctor's warning at the time of their birth that one would hardly outlive the other, repeated solemnly to her by her mother-in-law, often awakened a feeling of dread in her heart that she kept to herself.

Only two brief letters had found their way in safety from Mistress Bridget, and the interval since the last had been of great length, neither had they been fortunate in finding trustworthy

messengers to her. Tired of inactivity Richard had enlisted.

Another half-checked sigh, and Madam could bear it no longer; laying her delicate hand with its glittering rings on her husband's arm, she begged him to tell her what the trouble was that lay so heavily on him.

"The truth is I am worrying about Bridget. I fear we acted unwisely, and without due thought in leaving her alone. How shall we forgive ourselves if owing to our carelessness harm befall the child? *We* shall be to blame in the sight of God and man, for neglecting our nearest duty to take up with one further off."

"Surely, you take too strong a view of the matter. What else could we do but come?"

"Ay! Ay! Dear wife, so it seemed best to us at the moment, for you and I have always been so much to each other, having no chick for so long, that when at last the baby came, she seemed a thing right outside our lives; we never realized till now that she was the very kernel of home!"

"Now surely you are talking rubbish, what greater fuss was ever made of any baby than of ours! Did not you feast the whole place for miles around?—were not the bells a nuisance from the way they chimed? *Now* what is the matter?—you have gone so white!"

"You reminded me of what in truth I had no right to forget—the muffled peal that all in a moment tolled through the joyous strains, and then was gone!"

"I told you at the time, and I tell you again, something quite simple would account for that accident; it shows how out of sorts you truly are to hark back to that!"

"Ay, you didn't hear it, wife; it was gruesome, only thank the Lord, the chimes rang true again to the end, and so, if my belief is correct, it is a warning sent that in the midst of life, our winsome maid will suddenly meet Death: and I comfort myself with the notion that, as the joyous strain rang out again, it was but maybe a passing illness, and Life conquered!"

"If it gives you any comfort, pray think so.

I don't believe in such old wives' fables myself, as you know!"

"Well, it is hard *not* to believe in them when so often in the family records a muffled peal is mentioned; not always, though generally, happening at some great event in the lives of our ancestors, who died suddenly and unexpectedly, it is true.

"I had a great fancy for old records at one time, if you remember, and in them I found one or two peals mentioned, when trouble worse than death fell on our belongings. Also I found noted amongst the papers another queer thing that I kept to myself until now, and that is really what I am fretting about; so as we are on the subject, I may as well tell you about it. Whether some old curse was the origin of the muffled peal that I have heard now more than once, ringing out in the still night air when no mortal hand could have been on the ropes, or whether it was intended as a kindly warning by the Great Powers above, or simply due to some unexpected cause, I know not; but as surely as the bells ring out, on whatever *day* of the

month, the corresponding *year* of the person's life connected with that day will bring, and always has brought, trouble—sorrow—maybe death—to the member of our family concerned.

"Therefore our Bridget's trouble is fast approaching, for the muffled peal was last heard on the day of her birth, the twentieth of February. Remember, wife, if I am not at hand, that very great will need to be your faith and patience then, and give good heed to the child!"

"*Why* did you wait till now to tell me all this? It is a more serious matter than I thought for; would it not be well for Bridget herself to know?"

"Most certainly *not!* Keep the child from ever hearing of the old tale if you can. So far as I know, there is nothing uncanny or doubtful in the way of papers at Rithycombe. My father told me he remembered well a huge bonfire on the terrace when he was a lad, into which books and papers were hastily thrown with looks of fright. What those books were I cannot say. I have never come across any suspicious ones. I know there was a long story about one of my aunts, but that I told

you years since; no need to go into it now, and see —yonder rides a messenger!"

With more alacrity than his appearance promised, the Squire hurried to meet the armed letter-carrier, bearing papers from one part to another. He had quite a packet for Ellesmere, and amongst them one from Mistress Bridget to her parents. Eagerly they scanned the closely-written pages in which, in simple, quaint language she told them of her recent experiences. How, to save her from harm and trouble, the brave soldier had shielded her with his own name, and left her a military guard. Of how she wearied for their home-coming, and how long the days seemed in the present quiet period; would they not soon return to her? She could not speak too highly of Timothy's carefulness, nor of how kindly Martha and her husband looked after her. She said she spent hours at her wheel up in the old dormer room, and anxiously awaited the reply from her parents. Humbly she hoped they would approve of the important step she had taken, and give their loving sanction to what indeed had seemed the best and wisest course to take.

No doubt at so great a distance they would consider such haste unnecessary, and maybe undutiful, but not at all in excuse for herself, simply to clear Captain Markham's name from any idea of self-interested motives, she thought it fair to state that the old clergyman had warmly approved of the step; and Martha had declared none but a good man would have acted in such an unselfish manner, and that some of the soldiers had spoken most heartily to Timothy of their leader's upright, honourable character and stainless name.

With her loving duty, and earnest trust her parents would forgive her for acting so entirely on her own responsibility, she signed herself for the first time, their loving daughter, Bridget Markham.

In silence except for deep breaths both parents read the closely-written sheets, realizing very vividly that, no thanks to them, their child had been protected and cared for, even at the present moment, by the brave heart and generous act of a total stranger.

But themselves could they have blamed if evil

dark and dread had fallen on the flower of their house?

"God bless him!" murmured the old man, as he passed his hand over his dim eyes, whilst Madam's lips moved in wordless response. "My little lass, my little lonely lass! Ah! if we were but with her, we would part no more! I have acted on impulse more or less all my life, and now it has led us into this mess."

"But John, my man, your sister's prayer was very urgent for you to come at once. How could we guess or imagine the poor thing would linger so long? She worked herself nearly into a frenzy yesterday because I let fall the merest hint that we were wanted at home; she knows neither peace nor rest if she fancies for one moment you are out of call. Truly it is a difficult position, for granted that it was an error of judgment to start off quite so suddenly—and at the time you acted only on the dictates of your warm, loving heart—can it be right now that by our own will, we *are* here, to get back home at once, willy-nilly, and accelerate poor Eliza's death by so doing? Two

wrongs can never make a right. God in His mercy has guarded Bridget so far, can we not trust Him still? See, there is Thomas beckoning to you; what a sheaf of papers, to be sure."

"I thought it would surely interest you to hear that had you not got here when you did, it would have been folly and worse to attempt doing so later. The accounts in these papers of the terrible state of the country are something awful, and make one shiver for the wickedness that stalks abroad.

"Murder—ruin—cruelty—torture—pillage—and worse, have spread like an evil blight over our peaceful land. Those who are sober are wicked, and those who are drunk are reckless! My tenants are refusing to pay their rents on the ground that their crops have been so ruined by scattered bands of soldiers passing over them, that there will be *no* harvest, and I have no right to expect to fare better than my neighbours. Then I have a letter from Moberly saying the county bank has been broken into, and besides all available cash being carried off to pay the

army, papers and deeds of great value were wantonly burnt. In vain the respectable townspeople made a stand, and tried to save their property and keep order; the riff-raff who had no interest at stake were only too enchanted to have a row on, and joined heartily in the work of destruction, which would possibly have attained even greater dimensions had not a man suddenly ridden in amongst them, shouting that a fine old mansion some five miles off had just been fired, and there was loot enough for all!

"The clearance was something wonderful, but with all their speed they only found an empty shell and no treasures. The place had been raided days before; it was only a ruse on the messenger's part to try and save the bank. So far, so good—the scheme was a daring one, and deserving of success, but unfortunately the man himself, trusting to the darkness of the night, and the excitement of the people, to prevent recognition, had not hidden himself, as would have been only common prudence. The mob surrounded him at once on their return, and

literally tore him in pieces; so that though the loss, as far as *I* am concerned, is no light one, and puts me in an awkward position, when I think of that poor fellow's terrible end, I feel afraid to grumble. There now, like a true Briton, I am all the better for such an outpouring, tell me your tidings?"

Eagerly they repeated their news.

"Married! That *child!* You don't say so—to a Roundhead soldier, alack-a-day! What could have possessed her? His motive is very clear, forsooth —a pretty lass, and a heavy purse, both to be had for the asking! Take my word for it, brother and sister, he's a regular scoundrel working on the maid's fears like that. Just taken advantage of your absence—a made-up plot the whole thing. Be very sure there was some irregularity that when it suits him our fine gentleman will bring forward in triumph, and then how will it fare with Mistress Bridget? But I can find out about him from my friend Colonel Peter Robertson, who made the blunder of following Cromwell, so he's sure to know something of this fellow if he's, as you say, in

Lambert's command. When I get an opportunity, I'll make a few enquiries, and you'll see I shall come out right."

"I don't know about that; it is rather hard to condemn a man you've never seen, without hearing his version, and I don't see how he was to know Bridget would have a halfpenny. Did you tell the child where to hide the dowry, wife?"

"No, I had not time; indeed, we had never settled on a place, if you remember. I only told her to tell no one where she put it, and I dare say it is all right."

"John, I think you are an uncommonly lucky fellow to have got off so lightly at Rithycombe; only the furniture banged about and broken, whilst Fosbrook had his place burned, and at Marshfields they suffered so heavily."

"You forget Timothy's injuries."

"No, I don't—not a bit; but they didn't kill him, as they did the miser, poor old man! He never went out anywhere, did he, of late years?"

"No; shut himself up so completely, that for

days even his wife never saw him, and the windows of his private room where he spent all his time were never opened; indeed, rumour said that they were screwed down for safety. His sole amusement and occupation, his wife told me once, was fingering and counting his treasures, not only money, but plate and jewels as well; and Bridget says in her letter, when the raiders burst into his room, there he was, with all his secret places open, and his possessions heaped around him in confusion. Of course, they carried off everything, and murdered him cruelly into the bargain."

"Did you know him?"

"Formerly. Before this craze grew to such a disease, he was a pleasant man enough, but so close, his wife had the greatest difficulty to manage on the pittance he doled out. She was his housekeeper, certainly not a lady, but a very nice woman, and it was always supposed he married her for fear she should talk of his wealth."

"Well, I mustn't stay gossiping here any longer. I have a lot of business on hand this morning, and

by rights should be off to London, but I can't possibly go with poor Eliza in this state, so it makes things complicated."

Madam thought her husband seemed decidedly more cheerful than before the messenger's arrival; it had given him something fresh to think about, but presently he again reverted to his worry about Bridget's birthday. If his sister went on like this, should they be kept here until then, and not be able to watch over the child; he thought it would drive him mad. With both of them to keep her in sight all day, how *could* harm befall her?—but if absent, it was a very different pair of shoes. Argument and remonstrance alike failing to comfort him, Madam went indoors to her sister-in-law, more disturbed than she cared to own, by this haunting fear of her husband's.

So passed a few more days, and then very quietly Eliza died, bidding *all* farewell except the twin brother seated close beside her, with one of her thin hands held in his.

Madam breathed a sigh of relief as the hours rolled on, and her husband went about much as

usual ; not looking well by any means, that he had not done for long, but still not feeling ill or complaining in any way, but, poor woman, she rejoiced too soon.

The weather had been very dry, and in consequence of the unusual heat of the summer, many settlements had taken place in doors and walls.

Returning from the funeral, as Squire Conyngham and Thomas Melville passed under the portico, without any previous warning a heavy mass of stucco fell full on the Squire's head, sending him flat to the ground on the instant, and killing him on the spot.

No one had noticed the cracks widening steadily day by day, and it was an accident that might have happened to anyone, and for which no one was to blame.

Not that that idea gave much comfort ; it is always a satisfaction to declare it was someone's fault such and such a thing happened.

Poor Madam for long refused to believe her husband was dead ; neither would she leave his side night or day for a moment, until, almost by

force, they had to carry him away, to bury him beside his sister.

Thomas Melville made all arrangements, but dare not risk taking him home. Indignity to the dead was too awful an idea, and the roads were really unsafe for the living.

Madam collapsed altogether, when her state of terrible excitement had literally exhausted itself. Utter oblivion fell on the tired brain, and she lay like a log, from which state, after long days, she recovered, with memory for the time completely gone, and vitality much impaired. The doctor said they must give her time, and the clouds would lift from her mind, but that the rousing must come naturally, not be forced in any way, or permanent blankness might remain.

Should she ever worry too much over events that seemed dreamlike and vague, it *might*—he did not say it *would*—bring such a strain on her overtaxed brain, terrible consequences might ensue.

V.

THE TIDINGS SENT.

"On by moor and mountain green,
Let's buckle a', and on together,
Down the burn, and through the dene,
And owre the muir among the heather,
Owre the muir among the heather."

—*Jacobite Song.*

ONE fine autumn day, when the country round had subsided into a semblance of quiet that deceived *no* one, Timothy started to carry a letter to Captain Markham's widowed mother.

It had been no easy task for Bridget to write, and the shaky writing bore testimony to the effort made, as kindly and sadly she related the little she really knew of Reginald Markham. She told of the lonely common—of the chivalrous soldier who had gone out of his way to help and shield her—and how in the few minutes they had had together he had confidently assured her his mother would give her a warm welcome for his sake. Perhaps in the unknown future, if peace ever came again,

Madam Markham would pay her a visit, and see the flower-decked grave that meant so much to them. Dearly would Bridget love to tend and wait upon her.

News of her parents came but seldom, and she was *so* lonely, though she tried her best not to be selfish in her sorrow ; her nerves seemed all upset, and the slightest noise made her jump nearly out of her skin. The house was too large and dreary for its few inhabitants, and a blight seemed to have fallen on the place.

That was the substance of the sorrowful silk-tied missive that Timothy secured in his leathern belt, handed up to him as he stooped from beautiful Sultan to receive from Bridget's slender fingers the letter that had cost her much to write, and must and would cause bitter grief and sorrow when read. It always made her wince to see him on the glossy charger, and yet no other horse than her husband's was at her command, and she counted it a sacred duty to speed the sorrowful tidings to the lonely mother waiting, always waiting, for tidings that never came.

The horse knew her well by now, and stooped his strong neck for her to stroke his soft nose, whilst jealous Rough, unheeded, went barking at his heels.

So through the high wild lanes and over the wind-swept common, Timothy made his way, dreading the end of his journey in no slight degree, and yet knowing well that Bridget had purposely selected him on account of his admiration of her husband. He noted for himself the neglected state of the farms, and the trampled crops in the fields, and there was a sullen look on the faces he passed that struck him as something very unusual. And the smells from neglected drainage and choked-up ditches were something awful. The public inns in Crampton were full to overflowing, and such filthy songs issued forth amidst yells of hideous applause, the simple fellow blushed all over, and thanked his stars his lady was not with him. The same spirit of reckless idleness, ripe for any mischief, was abroad in the old market town of Dunstar, or Dun Tor, the towered hill, to use its quaint old name, from whose ivy-covered castle gateway

one fine day in 1413 the fair and gentle wife of the haughty lord of the castle, in her flowing robe of white, barefooted in the dusty roadway, started to make as long a circuit as she could to win a common for her people. Doubtless she had tried all forms of persuasion first, before half in fun, half in mockery, her husband promised to give her as big a piece as she walked round with her delicate feet bare.

Above the gateway he stood to watch her descending the steep rough pathway to the tiny village green below, the only bit of open ground the poor possessed, and that but a few yards square.

In his rough way he loved his gentle wife, but to a nature like *his*, it was impossible even to fathom the shrinking and the faintness that filled *her* gentle heart when she saw all the place was astir to watch her painful progress. For the flints were sharp and rough, and burnt like hot coals from the power of the sun, and even before she reached the level, there were ugly red marks left behind her. But her courage in its way was equal,

if not superior to her husband's, and with head erect and smiling lips she persevered. Women, children, and finally men, rushed to strew sand on her path, and to scrape the stones aside, but when she saw their object she bade them desist; it was not in the bond she was thus to be helped. Respectfully they obeyed her wish, only the pitiful tears streamed down the women's faces as they saw how she winced with agony, and almost crawled back to the ivy gateway. But the piece of ground she had encircled was of a goodly size—a right noble gift for all time to the inhabitants of the market town. The brave spirit carried her to within a yard of the ascending path to the castle, but could do no more; and even as her husband sallied forth to meet her, she fell fainting almost at his feet, and the spontaneous cheer that arose fell unheeded on her ears, as she was lifted from the ground. It was weeks before she could stand on her cut and bruised feet, but from that day the townspeople almost worshipped her, and she felt well repaid for the effort she had made, when she found how highly her

husband praised her courage, and how proud he was of her.

Timothy knew this story well, and looked with special interest at the frowning gateway, sheltering amidst thick trees on the side of the steep hill—that very gateway that in the form of a picturesque photo. adorns our railway carriages of to-day.

Desolate rides over ruined lands were his portion for many days, with nights spent at village inns, where queer bits of news fell to his share; how the people all over the kingdom had refused to pay taxes—how Monk, at the head of seven thousand veterans, had marched into England from Scotland, holding his own counsel as to his intentions—how that milk-and-water copy of a great original, General Lambert, had hastened northwards to encounter this army—and how a rumour had travelled straight from London town itself that the only choice now left to the nation was the rule of the Stuarts or of the army. Timothy heard this last report in the fair city of the seven hills; his goal was nigh at hand, but a few more hours and his

journey would be done. Had he wished to linger then, his steed would have refused, for his strides grew faster as he came on familiar ground, and Timothy rode with slack rein, leaving the way to him to choose.

Through a quiet, picturesque village, up a steep bit of road, and then Sultan stopped at lodge gates that were at least a welcome sight to him, with the surety of a nice warm mash to eat, and a fresh soft bed to roll on. The sound of the prancing hoofs brought a clean-looking woman hurrying eagerly out to the gate, with her face in a glow of pleasure, and a smile of welcome ready on her lips: how quickly the latter faded as she saw a stranger riding Sultan, whose name she called out in greeting, in the shock of a great surprise.

"I have news for Mrs. Markham," said Timothy very quietly. "I suppose I can ride up to the house?"

"The news is bad, I take it, for *you* to ride the horse?"

"Yes, bad as it possibly can be. Is your mistress able to hear it?"

"Poor soul, she has lived in terror of this day; *any* news must surely be a relief, for she has been half beside herself, fearing she knew not what. Walk Sultan quietly up, and I'll go on ahead. Ay, that is well done," as Timothy threw himself off. "To see *you* in her son's place would be too sad and sudden. Poor Master Reggie! All loved him here! There, I must not keep you; she has the first right to your sorrowful news. I shall hear all in time."

Wiping her eyes with her apron, she hurried up the drive, and Timothy slowly followed, marvelling at the trouble in the world allowed by a merciful God for reasons only known to Him.

A white-haired, frail old lady stood framed in the doorway by the time he reached it, with the few slow tears of age trickling unheeded down her face. One soft withered hand stroked Sultan's glossy neck, and it was very evident the creature recognised a friend from the way he pushed his velvet nose into the palm of her hand, where in the long ago, sugar or apples had often lain.

Timothy waited respectfully until she turned to

him, when, with his best reverence, he took from within his doublet the packet entrusted to him by Bridget.

"You will rest and refresh yourself, my good friend, and then I shall love to hear all you can tell me. My old man-servant will see to your comfort, and Sultan's mash must be ready. Ah me! it was not for nothing—it *never* is—that our best apple-tree showed flower and fruit together this season; I thought it a sign for myself, that I should rest in my quiet grave before next spring, but now it seems it was for my boy, my only child. God help me!"

Alone in her own quiet room, the poor heart-broken mother untied the silken fastenings of Bridget's packet, and gave a little gasping cry as she saw an enclosure addressed to her in her son's well-known hand. The outside was disfigured by an ominous stain, sad for a loving heart to see, and it had needed some effort on Bridget's part to leave unread the open letter, that *she* had sealed with the signet ring. Her own letter was simple and sad, but it touched a chord of sympathy in the

older woman's heart, that a more ceremonious narrative would have utterly failed to arouse.

Her son's letter was written on the eve of the fight, when a sure presentiment of disaster was weighing him down. He said most unexpectedly he had had a sudden chance given him of getting a line to the Manor—how, he had pledged himself not to say, for every man's hand was literally against his brother, and the friend of to-day was the foe of to-morrow. If all went well his mother would never read this, for there was, at present, no safe opportunity of getting it to her; but should he fall, it would, he knew, be no small comfort to her to have a parting word from him. Briefly he related what a hold the fair and gentle girl had taken upon him, left as she never ought to have been, well-nigh unprotected; that had he searched the whole world through, no more suitable daughter, or sweeter wife could he have found, than the girl he had encountered on the lonely common in the silence of the summer night. That all he possessed he had willed to her, for the estate itself was entailed, and his mother amply provided for. Per-

chance, in the providence of God, he should yet lead his bride to his mother's side, but if not, then surely he knew he had but to commend Bridget to her loving care, and, given time and opportunity, she would not fail him.

And so in love and charity with all men, ready for life or death as pleased the Lord above, he signed himself her faithful, loving son whilst life lasted; and if it might be so—beyond.—Reginald Markham.

It was hours before Timothy received his summons to the oak parlour, where whips and weapons hung around told him most plainly whose private room it had been.

Mrs. Markham looked sunk and aged, but her voice was as gentle as ever as she asked Timothy to begin at the beginning, and tell her all he could of her son and his wife.

Be sure that Bridget had full justice at her trusty servitor's hands, and he told his tale so well that Mrs. Markham could almost fancy she saw it all—the old timbered house in its lonely vale—the rough village near—the tiny church—the hurried

wedding—and the last sad scene of all, when, in the quiet early morning, they had laid her soldier son in his peaceful grave.

Timothy said the soldiers had carried him along, and Bridget walked behind. The old parson's voice was very shaky, as again from memory he recited the proper prayers, and his eyes were dim from more than age as he thought of that other service so lately held.

The hour had purposely been chosen before the village should be astir, and no volley was fired, by Bridget's wish. There was no saying what unseemly conduct would have taken place, even amongst the peaceful dead, if the rough, ignorant folk about had got wind of the fact that a hated Roundhead had been buried in the churchyard.

Wreckers, smugglers, robbers, and Royalists, *when* it suited them, but Roundheads, never!

Mrs. Markham asked him many questions about Bridget, all of which he answered truly. He told of her tendance of the sick and suffering; how she spent hours spinning at her wheel in the high-pitched gable room, which commanded such an

extensive view of the country round; how very seldom tidings came of her absent parents, and of what a terribly superstitious part theirs was.

Then he lowered his voice almost to a whisper as he told her what even Bridget had not heard; that when the captain lay on the blood-stained ground, whilst the soldiers who were to form his escort bustled around, and wandering figures that boded no good were dancing here and there amongst the dead and dying, robbing some, killing others, Reginald Markham had solemnly asked *his* promise, poor, ignorant fellow as he was, to watch over and guard his youthful bride whilst danger threatened.

"And God help me, so I will, madam; with your goodwill I will depart on the morrow. I can get a lift from here for part of the way, perhaps as far as Bridgewater, and methinks I shall but fidget till I see the golden letters of our weather-cock standing out clear against the sky. Without taking this journey, I never could have imagined the country was in such a state, for we are in a very quiet part, and news reaches us but seldom. Why, madam, as I rode over Bristol Bridge I saw

a huge placard, with great printed letters, offering large rewards to any person or persons who should give such certain information as should lead to the discovery of a witch or witches, and such crowds pressed forward to read the same, it struck me it might be something new. The Bible words 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live' were quoted."

"I have not heard of it before in Bristol, but for the last fourteen years there has been a great outcry made about witches, and I have heard cruel tales about their sufferings; but if it is true that their power is almost unlimited, I certainly agree with those who endeavour to rid our land of them, though any cruelty in the matter would be very wicked. And now tell me if my new daughter is loved amongst the poor around her."

"Mistress Bridget is more feared than loved, shame on our ungrateful folks that so it should be, always ready as they are to ask her aid, and then abuse her behind her back. If the Squire had but had a son to follow him, things would have been surely different; folks will put up with plain speaking from a *man*, when they call it interference

in a maid. If I had any say in the matter, none of the cottages in the village should my lady enter; the people are not worth it."

"Timothy, I think you are wrong; it is but our simple duty to help our neighbours, and if my young daughter has the power and the will to do so, it would be a sin to hinder her."

"Well, madam, you should know best, but maybe I've not made my meaning clear. A few weeks ago, a sudden, sharp storm came on; the sea rose in fury, and the breakers thundered on the reefs. A poor ship was caught in the gale, and *purposely* lured on the rocks. Her cargo was known to be spirits and tobacco, which the people around decided should never pay the customs' dues. They got her smashed on the reefs sure enough, on a rock we call the 'Shark's Tooth'; some of the crew found a precarious footing, others were seen clinging to the rigging. Only one was carried alive next morning into our village, the nearest to those particular rocks. Mistress Bridget, busy tending a sick child, immediately followed him in, to see if her help was needed, and he—poor foolish

fellow!—out and told her of the false lights that had lured them on with hopes of harbour, strangers to our coast as they were; and that to the fact of the Excise men suddenly appearing he owed his life, for the wreckers had not time to finish him, and conceal the cargo, neither dared they leave him behind to give evidence against them. With dark looks and threatening words they had handed him along byways and noways until the cottages were reached. Mistress Bridget was terribly upset, and she spoke out her mind to those present, heedless, fearless of possible consequences. Sullen silence answered her, and she left, fancying *her* words, poor maid, were strong enough to impress reckless men, who, when I passed through a while later, were talking in a very ugly fashion of serving out someone or other, for meddling in matters that concerned them not.

"A Somersetshire man can bide his time, but he keeps his word!

"Had they had the faintest notion that directly the whisper reached *me* that the Whistling Maid was abroad, I up and went at my best pace to the

Excise officers' quarters, and told them to be spry, for the wreckers were out, a ship in distress, and the crew would be lost—let alone the cargo, it is certain sure *my* treatment would have been rough indeed, but for my lady's sake I had taken uncommon good care that none save the bats and owls should know of my warning visit.

"Young Mistress fretted sorely all that evening to think of the brave lives lost for lack of a little help, and I sat tongue-tied like a fool, for well I knew it was no uncommon accident on those cruel rocks of ours. Early in the morning I met her dressed in hood and cape ready to sally forth, and on my asking what could take her out so early, she lifted her great dark eyes to mine, and said she had stayed awake all night, regretting she had not said the rescued sailor must come to the Manor; so now she was off to beg he might be brought up at once, and she would tend him. I prayed her earnestly to go on no such errand; if need be, I could take any message for her: the villagers had spent the night in drinking all too freely of the stolen spirits, and their cottages

would be no fit place for her! She drew herself up in haughty scorn at first, and said she feared no one; but at last, by humble prayers, and by using the captain's name, I got her to say I might go instead.

"Well, madam, I went, but not even to you will I tell all I saw or heard, but *nothing* you can imagine could beat the reality. The sailor was dead—*how* boots not the telling. Was it likely that a crew of desperate men would let such a witness to their last night's lawless, wicked deeds live? And moreover one who had already blabbed? Not they! His doom was sealed from the first word he spoke to Madam Bridget. The Excise men about us are not sharp enough for the work they have to do; and maybe it is excusable when one thinks for a moment that every mother's son of them has most likely brother, cousin or friend, on the other side, to lay hold on whom would bring vengeance on them and theirs in very decided fashion.

"Pardon me, madam, for talking so much, but I wanted to make it clear to you, what only this long ride of mine has brought home very forcibly

to me, that of all unsettled parts, ours is probably amongst the worst, ripe for any crime."

"I hope you will urge your lady to be careful; it seems to me she is over brave; and, Timothy, I need not remind you that my dear son looked to you to guard her well, the pretty creature. Give her my dear love, and say if God sees fit, not many months shall pass before we meet in person. I have much to settle and arrange before I can leave this place, but the moment I am free shall see me on my way to her. Now you will like to have a look round the house and grounds; it is a fair and lovely place that after *me*, alas! must pass to a distant cousin."

Timothy wandered all over the house, escorted by the trusty old butler, who eagerly drank in any details of his master that the messenger thought fit to tell. Then he told of the conflicting feelings abroad in the towns and villages he had ridden through in his long ride of over one hundred and eighteen miles. How some people were sunk in a sullen stupor that savoured strongly of a violent reaction from lawless words and deeds; villages, desolate beyond description, with silence

everywhere, and blackened ruins bearing witness to the vengeance wreaked. Some few folk professing a light-heartedness they did not feel, whilst women wept, children starved, and men drank deep to drown alike the thought of their own ill-deeds, and the misery of their once happy homes.

It was not a bright look-out by any means, but what could you expect in such unsettled times?

Eagerly the servants listened to his tales; he was a great traveller in their eyes, and we all know how pleasant it is to have a good audience. Timothy, in spite of his sad errand, enjoyed himself vastly, and was quite sorry to find the evening gone, and the hour of rest at hand.

But sleep he could not, in spite of his long ride; fears of he knew not what weighed him down, and he was thankful when the light grew strong enough for him to rise and roam abroad.

In the morning light, the traces of shock and sorrow were very visible on Mrs. Markham's face, when she summoned Timothy to say farewell, for trouble like hers is not fully felt in the sorrow of the first hearing; it wears into the mind and body

far more heavily when there has been time for full realization that never more will the loved ones pass before our eyes, or hand of theirs grasp ours —gone without even the sorrow of an illness to prepare the mind—gone in the pride of manhood's strength, whilst ailing, feeble bodies exist on to extreme old age, not even sometimes considered welcome to the smallest share of home by those they have brought into the world, and cared for in their tender youth.

Timothy was soon on his way to the village inn, where the carriers bound for Bristol stopped to water the horses, and he was greatly struck by the general sorrow at the tidings he had brought, expressed by the villagers waiting to see the lumbering waggon well on its way.

"Eh! He was a good sort, Master Reginald; we could have spared many better, and the leddy herself, 'tis a grievous trial for her, poor soul! Most of young Master's troop was made up by men from these parts, and 'tis certain sure any one of them would have died to save the captain's life; but that was not to be, worse luck!"

PUBLIC BERMONDSEY

VI.

PERSECUTION.

"'Twas a rough night
My young remembrance cannot parallel
A fellow to it."

—*Macbeth.*

It was an awful night in late November. For hours church bells had been rung to ward off, if possible, the violence of the coming storm, and to restrain the power of evil spirits wandering wild. The wind howled as if in pain, the rain poured down in floods, the bare trees bent before the cruel blast, snapping and breaking in all directions. Not a night for a dog to be abroad in, much less a human being.

Along a slushy lane, a ponderous, heavy cart jolted and jerked; a miserable scarecrow of a horse was between the shafts, all unequal to the heavy load, and no sawing at his mouth, or lashing his thick, rough coat with a heavy whip, could move him out of his monotonous jog-trot. It

would have been far quicker for the solitary passenger to have alighted and walked, had he known his way, but that was just where Timothy was at fault. He had already come miles out of his path, and lost valuable time by taking what he understood would prove a short cut.

His return journey bid fair to be far more difficult than he had expected, or maybe, he had not realized that with Sultan at his command, he was free to travel at what pace he chose, and he had taken little heed as to whether the ordinary carriers' waggons were to be relied on or not. Many times that day had he bitterly regretted his pig-headedness in refusing Mrs. Markham's repeated offers of a mount. Over and over again he had represented how easily he had come, and that the roads were quiet and safe. In such a tiny hamlet as hers, there was no one to say him Nay, and suggest difficulties.

All had gone well at first; believing only that he had missed the regular carrier, he got a seat in a waggon at Bristol, which took him as far as Watson, twenty-eight miles, and then his troubles

began. He could not hire trap or horse, and found all public conveyances were suspended. The people in that part had struck for no taxes, like the rest of the kingdom, and he was quite jeered at as a fool when he asked about carriers' waggons. None had run for months; mounted messengers —often untrustworthy, carried the news, and if you had no horse of your own, you might go walk, and welcome.

So Timothy did, finding entreaties and bribes alike thrown away, but whether by malice or accident, he was wrongly directed, and tramped all day only to find he had well-nigh made a circle, and was back where he had started from. Never very sweet-tempered, he then promptly lost the small remnant of control that yet remained to him, and from angry words, he and the men who had misdirected him, would soon have come to cruel blows, the end of which might have been disastrous, if an old, shaky carrier's cart had not pounded by. The driver promised to take him on after an hour's rest, if he made it worth his while, and Timothy sullenly withdrew inside the

tavern, and flung himself angrily into the settle by the fire.

His late antagonists scowled heavily at him, and slouched into the stable. A low whistle, muttered voices, and Timothy fully awoke to the peril of his position, for which he had mainly himself to thank. In the dusk of a November evening, he had risked more than he had thought of, by his want of self-control.

Darkness outside, gloom within, a stranger to the place, friendless, alone, in a solitary building; what were his chances?

The muttered voices grew louder, hob-nailed boots struck sparks from the rough stones without, a gruff, thick voice said "Good evening," and the old carrier stumped in, and banged down with a clatter the pail with which he had watered his horse. No doubt he was as bad as the others; what good to appeal to him?—how worse than foolish to let those wretches know he had money on him when he tried to bribe them to find him beast or conveyance?

The carrier stepped quietly up to him, and whispered in his ear:

"Take my hat, and muffle this scarf round your chin; put this stone in your mouth, and rub the horse down with yon wisp of hay; then bolt when *they* come in, straight along the road, and lie in the ditch somewhere, until you hear me coming. It will give you half a chance, and is the best I can do for you. Only you mind me of my own poor boy, dead in these wicked fights, I'd stir not hand or foot to help you; why should I? It's none of my business. Haste and be wary."

"And you? They will kill you!"

"Not they. Old Sam has cut his wisdom teeth, and knows every turn and passage in this rabbit warren of a place. Go!"

With temples throbbing, Timothy rubbed and scrubbed at the jaded old beast, with his bent knees and heavy coat, feeling sure all the time he resented a stranger's touch, and finding the minutes hours, as he listened to the plans for his own death and burial, before those three thick-set ruffians went inside the house to finish *him*. Yes! There was no doubt of it; he had heard enough of their mutters to know that, but for Old Sam's

assistance, his life would have been taken, and none the wiser! Like a hunted hare, he panted breathlessly along the dark road, not willing to remain in the near vicinity of the "Cat and Fiddle," and while he lay in the deep ditch and listened to the gathering storm, vowed to be more cautious in future, for his dear lady's sake.

When at length Old Sam lumbered up, he asked him eagerly how he had fared, and the carrier quite chuckled as he said:

"It was just child's play, and nothing more." He had lounged in, mopping his face, at the end of the hour, and asked for his passenger, when all three speaking at once, told him he had left some while ago—curse him!

Then the two fell to gossip, and Timothy was surprised at the tales the old fellow told him of misery and violence, that in his work he came across. He strongly advised him to be more wary in future, if he cared to keep his head on his shoulders, and if possible, to walk the rest of the way, and only by daylight.

At last the lights of Lyng came in view—

Timothy's route, but not old Sam's—so he had to leave his friendly refuge, with many thanks, and plod on on foot. It was a town of some importance, and though now quite late in the evening, the narrow streets were all in a bustle, and full of muffled-up men and women, in twos and threes, hastening along. In answer to his enquiries, he was told that the great Witch-finder, Mathew Hopkins, had arrived there yesterday morning. The inhabitants had eagerly paid his heavy fee of twenty shillings, to free their town from the pest of suspected witches. His first court of enquiry was to be held *now*, in the town hall, when the results of his preliminary investigations would be open to examination before the public, who would thus be able to judge for themselves of the strict justice shown. Curiosity impelled Timothy to join the passing crowds, who all surged one way, evidently bent on the same object.

The town hall was crammed by curious folk, and badly lit by vile-smelling oil lanterns. The magistrates of the district were all present, with the town councillors in state, and the ruffian Witch-

finder, and his cruel band, faced them. They were an ugly lot to look at, any time, but now, in the flickering light, they might well have passed for demons, with their great bare arms, and greasy leathern aprons.

Hopkins himself was a short, thick-set, powerful brute, with fierce eyebrows almost meeting, wide mouth, from which a few yellow teeth stuck out, protruding eye-balls, and enormous ears. But more than anything else, the cruel expression of the face made Timothy feel chilly down his spine. It was not likely that the assistants, selected in all cases by Hopkins himself, would be far behind him in cruelty and coarseness.

Beside this repulsive group a few of the "toys" of their trade were piled; chains, irons, vices, weights, thumb-screws, pinchers, and a cat-o'-nine-tails, that evidently had seen service. Tortures of all kinds were Hopkins' speciality.

The oldest magistrate on the bench opened the proceedings. His nose was a dark purple, and one foot, swathed in bandages, was supported by a stool. He told the people that more than three

thousand witches in England had been put to death during the Long Parliament, in the earnest hope and endeavour of freeing the land from what *he* considered an awful curse; that in spite of this wise measure the canker was spreading fast, and no one could possibly feel secure from an evil eye blighting them, unless a vigorous and united effort was made in the cause of humanity at large to exterminate the mischief. There had been published and proclaimed in every town of note, the order from the Privy Council for clergy and squires alike to band together, and uphold the law of James I. in this matter by burning all witches, *real or suspected*, in their own districts; and he called on his fellow-townsfolk to aid and abet Mathew Hopkins in his absolutely necessary, and unpleasantly dangerous calling. Few of them would care to brave what *he* did daily—nay, often hourly, for the benefit of others; they owed him their warmest thanks and their deepest gratitude for his self-denying efforts in this painful duty, and must endeavour to let no personal private feelings interfere with the public good.

He ceased, amid loud applause, but Timothy felt there was another view of the subject as he gazed on Hopkins' ugly face, and watched his hideous sneers.

Timothy had by now elbowed and pushed his way into a good place for seeing and hearing, and listened to every word, with mouth wide open and staring eyes.

Now before the expectant gaze of the crowd a heavy curtain was drawn back, revealing the group that awaited judgment. Hisses loud and frequent greeted their appearance. What a crew they were!

Wild, unkempt, unwashed, dirty hags for the most part, some screaming in terror, others swearing hideously. One, between two men, was never allowed to stand still one moment, but was dragged and pushed backwards and forwards without intermission. Her eyes were dull and glazed, her swollen tongue hung out of her parched mouth, whilst her long black hair was caught and torn frequently in her keepers' clutches, as they pushed her along. She was out and away the youngest of the miserable group.

Another poor wretch, huddled in a corner, proved to have his great toes and thumbs tightly tied together, and in this cramped position he had now remained for hours, with the cords actually cutting through his swollen flesh to the bone.

The others were as yet unbound, but these "obstinate ones" in Hopkins' sight required extra discipline, and a cruel smile of triumph played round his thin lips as he glanced now and then in their direction. They had refused to confess, and nothing, therefore, was too bad for them.

A man rose suddenly from the body of the hall and asked for the law quoted to be cited.

The town clerk was handed an old folio, and read the following in a sing-song voice:

"In the year of grace 1603—

"Anyone that shall use, practise, or exercise any invocation of any evil or wicked spirit, or consult or covenant with, entertain or employ, feed or reward any evil or wicked spirit to or for *any* purpose, etc., etc. . . . Such offenders duly and lawfully attainted shall suffer death."

There was silence for a minute, then another man rose, and said, to be quite in order he must read a statement, most fairly drawn up, that would show to all how serious the evil was.

A learned writer whose book he had lately had the pleasure of reading, said that there were no less than twelve distinct methods adopted in bewitchings, but they were set forth at such length it would be impossible to read them through there, and also quite unnecessary; their evil practices were too well known for a publication of the systems to be desirable. Starting, therefore, from the acknowledged belief that all forces of the earth, water, air, and fire were under the witches' control, and that laying diseases on man and beast, intercourse with the devil, etc., etc., were part and part only of their evil work. To be brief, many there had suffered much from sorcery or witchcraft, taking sometimes the form of ruined crops, robbery, house-breaking; was any punishment, torture, death itself, too bad for such wretches?

Here such a storm of shrieks and yells arose, Timothy felt deafened; hats were waved, hands

held up, and shouts of "Burn all such hags!" rang round the building.

Then the brutal Mathew Hopkins strode forward, and in his harsh voice said he would read the list of those he had discovered practising magic. With the help of his "toys," and with the bribe of life, several had at once owned to their close dealing with the devil; others, more obdurate, had required sharper handling, but the people could judge for themselves. An old, wrinkled hag was pulled forward, who was accused of being a body-snatcher, on the evidence of some powders made from human bones being found in her hovel, marked "Enchanted Powders for Love and Life."

Whether they were reliable love philtres or not, anyone present was welcome to try, but he had little doubt on the subject himself, and had had her thrown into the river that morning, and she had floated—sure sign of guilt—although she vehemently protested the powders were made from chicken bones, and she had never violated a grave in her life.

A laugh of mockery and derision from the audience showed their view of the case, and brought the poor creature to her knees, praying and begging for mercy.

Not one person called for pity on her, Timothy noticed, though the man standing jammed against him muttered "Shame!" audibly. A heavy flump on the platform made him peer behind Mathew Hopkins, only to see the poor walking witch had, in spite of tugs and rough pulls from her keepers, fallen in a heap on the stage, and lay there moaning miserably.

For fear pity should awaken, the Witchfinder said she had been guilty, some weeks ago, of throwing a dead hand into the peaceful home of one of their best-known residents, and the portended doom had so preyed upon the inmates, several had gone out of their minds in consequence.

A hiss curled round the building; what hope or room for mercy was here?

"Her doom is settled," proceeded the strident voice, "but always just and fair, I call on any witness to prove my statement false."

To Timothy's surprise his neighbour pushed by him, throwing back his heavy cloak as he did so, and displaying a well-shaped head with decided, clean-cut features.

That he was well known was evident, for exclamations of "Doctor John" were frequent. He strode upon the platform and faced the room, holding up his hand to enforce silence.

"That poor wench, Margaret Finch, is absolutely ignorant of any crime or witchcraft whatever, as, if you grant me time, I can make clear to you very briefly."

Here Hopkins tried to drown his voice by calling out he was misinformed, and the proceedings must continue; but the doctor was a match for the bully, and, being a favourite, had the people's ear, and calmly made his statement, whilst Mathew swore at his subordinates for having told him the doctor could by no possibility be there, as he had been summoned elsewhere.

Dr. John said the woman was a tried and faithful servant in his house, with a service of many

years' standing, devoted alike to him and his. One or two invalids of slightly-affected intellect lived in his house—had done so for long. Coming in one day with his wife and two of the hysterical ladies, Margaret had just opened the door to them when she started back in horror, pointing out to them the bleached skeleton of a hand lying on the door-step. The invalid ladies promptly had hysterics; one of them had not yet got over the shock to her nerves, he doubted if she ever did so, the other was all right long ago. After some trouble and private search, he found the hand fitted the skeleton of a criminal hanging in chains at the cross-roads outside the town, but the object of the deed he had not discovered, or the doer of it. It might have been mischief or malice. They had tried to keep the matter quiet, and quite hoped, as it was now some weeks ago, that they had succeeded; but to his sorrow, on returning from a long round and an anxious day's work yesterday, he had found his faithful servant had been mysteriously carried off *where*, his wife had failed to find out. Had it not been for a soiled scrap of paper, thrust into his

hand that evening by someone unknown, with "Try the Town Hall" on it, he might never have known her fate, poor soul! Private spite, or the hope of the reward, had wrought her this evil, for a more guileless creature never breathed. He requested that she should be released at once, and the people, led by his good influence, shouted "Set her free!" with one accord.

Ay! But she *was* free—free from all care and trouble, free from the life on earth! When Dr. John stooped over her and lifted her listless hand, he laid it gently down again with a sigh, and rose to his feet. Very stern was his voice, as he asked the two men who had been her keepers a few brief questions, and then turned again to the audience.

"For thirty-six hours that poor creature has been kept on the tramp, foodless, waterless; God knows what else she had to bear: with all the anguish and fear of a horrible fate before her, her heart has failed, and she has gone to the Better Land, where God Almighty will surely prove a more merciful judge than her fellow-creatures have been. Take warning that these pitiful trials which

long ere this have made *my* heart ache, run not into wanton cruelty."

In vain Hopkins tried to stop him, the doctor *would* finish ; then signing to two men he knew to lift the poor woman from the platform and follow him, he left the building by a door at the back.

Timothy had now but one wish, and that was to get out as speedily as might be, but this was very difficult, and he had to listen to many charges and see several so-called tests applied before he really gained the door, and found himself in the pouring rain. A man brushed hastily by him, almost knocking him over ; with a hurried apology he strode on, then turned sharply on his heel, and looked up in Timothy's honest, perplexed face.

" Had enough of it, eh ?—or are you on the look-out for more poor creatures ? Pah ! It makes my blood boil. I'd rather ten thousand times be an honest fool than a clever rogue like yonder black-guard Hopkins. Ay, it's true ! "

" Sir, I am but a country fellow, and my brain is sick with yonder scene. Could you but tell me some decent inn, it would be a real charity."

"Yes, go down Brick Lane, through Blindman's Court, and—there! You'll never find it such a night; you'd best come with me, and when I've done my night's work, I'll set you on your way. It is a positive disgrace the way these streets are lit, or rather *not* lit. I am all too late as it is, but I was on my way to this case, when the paper I mentioned in court was thrust into my hand, and Margaret was worth saving, poor wench! What thought you of the play?"

"I liked it not, but knew not what to think. Why, sir, they ran huge pins through the poor creatures' eyes, hands and bodies, and they never called out; surely they *are* possessed?"

"Not they, poor souls! The pins went back into the handles, I misdoubt not, but proof I've none; only when a wretch like Hopkins promises life and liberty if free confession be made, often under tortures too horrible to mention, what wonder if the poor frantic creatures own to anything and everything they are accused of, and then awake to the fact the stake still awaits them at the end? I know the game, I've seen it played

before, but am powerless to prevent or help. See that cottage; it is for a sick child in it I am sent for, said to have been bewitched, and under the influence of the evil eye pining away. Fancy how late it is, why, there goes twelve."

The cottage seemed brightly illuminated as they approached it, and a curious sing-song sounded from within, and came out through a cracked pane of glass.

With his finger on his lip Dr. John beckoned to Timothy to look in, and a queer scene met his gaze.

A huge fire was burning hollow on the hearth, in front of which, on a spit, a sheep's heart was roasting whole, stuck all over with pins—large, small, straight, crooked, black and white. In front of the almost furnace sat an old couple continually throwing salt on the fire, and chanting monotonously the following incantation:

> "It is not this heart I wish to burn,
> But the person's heart I wish to turn.
> Wishing them neither rest nor peace,
> Till they are dead and gone."

A group of friends in the window end of the room watched to see the result.

Only a minute had the doctor and Timothy watched the weird ceremony, with the fitful flames playing over the intent faces, when something black sprang sharply out of the fire which, already quite hollow, fell together with a sudden quenching of the bright light, and caused an immediate rising of thick smoke, which must have been nearly suffocating. The old woman tumbled backwards in her chair with fright, whilst the old man promptly joined the watching group in the window, who loudly applauded his pluck in trying this famous cure for the evil eye, and assured him they could all swear, the black cat, with his eyes flashing and claws distended, had jumped out and vanished in smoke. Now all would be well and the child cured!

"Why, it was only a bit of charred wood fell out, I saw it myself," said Timothy, turning in surprise to find Dr. John had gone indoors, so he waited outside, wondering much how people could really and truly persuade themselves to see what they wished. Often had he heard of this well-known cure, but never before had seen it tried, and

naturally he felt a little sceptical of the result in this case.

A nervous dread was taking hold of him, an awful fear clutched at his heart. Suppose that brutal wretch came their way, who was rumoured to possess the evil eye amongst them? Mistress Bridget! Mistress Bridget! Mistress Bridget!"

He started as if shot; who had whispered that name in his ear? What letters of fire were these dancing round him? What business had he loitering here, when trouble might be stalking near her, and he not at hand to give what help he might?

"Why, man, I believe you were asleep; you jumped so when I touched you, and called out so scared—'Mistress Bridget!'"

Timothy told in few words how worried he felt at the difficulties he found in getting home, and Dr. John gave him counsel on the same, repeating very strongly the old carrier's warning only to travel by day. He said the last news was that the Parliament and the Army were at loggerheads, and the nation well-nigh distracted, a condition of things that allowed liberty of all sorts to highway-

men and the like, with no one to check them or call them to order. Seeing Timothy's preoccupied air, he kindly asked him what further was troubling him.

"Surely the last scene has no power over a sensible fellow like *you*, my man! Why, only that I was so late, nothing of the kind would have occurred, but getting impatient and excited waiting so long, that old couple were easily prevailed on to try the famous exorcism of the evil eye. The child will soon be better, and their belief in the charm stronger than ever. I come in for queer things in some of my long rounds, and crossed Hopkins' path not a great while ago; and under the influence of fear and torture saw and heard men and women confessing to anything he put in their mouths, riding broomsticks, changing babies, mildewing crops, and the rest of it. Alas! some of his wicked cruelties are too bad for me to relate; would to God I could forget them. It is the same with those folk we have just left; their will power is so small, they have given themselves so entirely up to the idea the child has been bewitched that

they now actually believe it. Saucers of water everywhere, quite a row of horseshoes, a large bough of rowan wood, with dolls stuck full of pins, surround that little helpless boy, who only needs care and kindness, and the strong stuff I have given him will work its own cure ; but the pins will have the credit, not the medicine. Enough ; I'm fagged out."

"Pardon, sir, but could you not have stopped that wretch taking possession of the town?"

Doctor John passed his hand wearedly over his worn face, ere he replied.

"I did try my very utmost when the offer was first made. I said, all too hotly, I fear now, that anyone possessing an ounce of common-sense would agree with me to manage our affairs ourselves, without a paid informer, but against superstition who can prevail? No one backed me up ; all were in favour of Hopkins. In disgust and anger I left the building, refusing to sit on the committee, or act further in the matter ; hence I was *very* doubtful whether I could save my poor servant or not, and dare not move in the business

half as speedily as I wished to, for fear of losing all. I was prepared to use bribery, if necessary, as a last resource, but as it happened, my townsmen bore no malice for my hasty words, and would, I believed, have backed me up most heartily. Here we are at my house, and it is so late we must find you a shake-down somewhere. Ah, Caroline, is that you? How late for you!"

"And who could be anything but late, such a night as this, John? It was impossible to go to bed sooner, and I knew how bad you would feel about poor Margaret, faithful soul! How we shall miss her. I never dreamt of such an end as this, and wish I knew who had done the mischief. She went out to see her sister yesterday morning, and I felt sure they had made her stay the night, the weather was so rough. Who is that with you?"

"An honest fellow travelling homewards who finds it difficult to make his way in these disturbed times."

A few questions and answers, and Timothy discovered his hostess was a friend of Mrs. Mark-

ham's—indeed godmother to the captain, of whose death she heard with sorrow, and about whom he could tell her much of interest. Mrs. John asked if he knew Sir James Fielding, her nephew, who lived about ten miles, she thought, from Dunstar. Timothy answered promptly that he did, and a right pleasant gentleman he was when last he saw him some years back, when he had almost lived at the Manor, being a prime favourite of the Squire's. At present he did not even know his whereabouts. The children had gone to live with an aunt during his absence. If anyone could be said to possess influence over the rough country-folks, it was Sir James; he had a good word for all, and ready help for those in need.

Mrs. John looked very pleased at such hearty praise of her favourite nephew, and in spite of the sad trouble of the day, took a keen interest in Timothy's adventures and his manifest devotion to his young mistress, all of which she beguiled from him as the two men sat at their late supper; and so kind were both the doctor and his wife to Timothy, that when he left the gate early next

morning, mounted on the doctor's cob, he felt he was leaving true friends behind, and that his troubles were mostly over for the present.

Riding carelessly along with a slack rein, he never noticed when his horse put his foot into a rabbit-hole on a wild common, and he was shot suddenly over his head violently to the ground, where he lay in a heap, whilst the frightened horse galloped wildly on, leaving Timothy quite unconscious, with a broken leg and fractured ribs, and no letter or name upon him to say who he was or whither bound; for the small valise that generally was slung on his back was to-day fastened to the saddle so firmly it could not fall off, and in it was all his money and also letters of sorrow and pity from both Mrs. Markham and Mrs. John, to young Madam.

VII.

SIR JAMES.

"But let no footstep beat the floor
Nor bowl of wassail mantle warm
For who would keep an ancient form,
Through which the spirit breathes no more?"
—TENNYSON.

"HULLO, Martha, how are you? Blooming as ever I see; are your mistress and the Squire within?"

"Good gracious, Master Jem—Sir James, I beg your pardon, how you made me jump; it is not thinking of you I was, to be sure, and how are you, sir, and the children, bless their little hearts? But come you in out of the bitter cold."

"Little! Well! Some of them are getting big, I would have you know; they lead me a rare dance, I can tell you. I shall have to get Madam here to take them in hand; she was so successful with me!"

The speaker was a fine-looking man, English to the back-bone, tall and well set-up, with an air of

command about him that spoke for a position of authority. Yet trouble had ploughed deep lines on the forehead, and the pleasant smile had a sad edge to it, in spite of the cheerful voice. An orphan from his youth, he had always found counsel and help, with love and care, readily given him in the old Manor House of Rithycombe, where before Mistress Bridget's arrival on the scene, he had almost become like an adopted son; and very likely would quite have taken the place of one, if the wee baby had not entirely altered the state of affairs. That in the far future he might really become their son had been the darling wish of both Squire and Madam, though nearly twenty years lay between the two.

It was pretty to see the strong, powerful fellow submitting to the whims of the little maid, who found "big brother" a very willing slave.

Then the house of cards came down with a crash; a brief summer madness, a few weeks of acquaintanceship, and James Fielding bespoke Madam's love and care for his fair young wife, Hester Brooke.

It was a blow, and yet one they ought to have foreseen, against which no word could be said. The "care" he asked for was always given, even if the "love" was slow to come. Perhaps Madam never realised that it had truly come till a few years later she stood in a quiet chamber, listening to the gasping words in which, very slowly and with falling tears, poor Hester Fielding besought her to fill a mother's place to the children she was leaving.

Sir James was nearly heart-broken, though neighbours openly said it was impossible he and his wife *could* have much in common. She was a mere doll, and he a clever fellow. For a few years he stayed on at Fielding's Court; then a great restlessness fell on him, and leaving his children to his sister's care in Rutlandshire, he went abroad, *where* no one knew. The Squire missed his constant visits greatly, and Bridget, child-like, soon forgot him. Rithycombe was such a quiet little place, with no resident gentry, except at the Manor House, that there was no one in the least to take his place.

Now about forty-one, he stood before Martha at the open door, the picture of health and strength.

"Then you have not heard about poor master?" said she, wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron. "Madam is coming home shortly. Mistress Bridget had a letter yesterday, but *he* has gone to his rest!"

"You don't say so! Dear, dear! Now tell me all about it—he was a father to me."

So Martha told the tale of how, late last evening, a messenger had walked into the hall with a silk-tied missive in his hand from Ellesmere. The news of her father's death was a terrible shock to the lonely girl, and it was an added grief to think he could not be laid with his fathers in the peaceful village church-yard. The country was too much upset, the roads too unsafe for that to be possible; but her uncle told her all he could to comfort her, and said he had purposely delayed sending the heavy tidings until Madam was much better; and that now, on the first opportunity, Bridget might expect to see them, for he should take her mother home himself. He said his sister-

in-law was greatly altered, and it was only by degrees that memory had returned, but when it did, she fretted so ceaselessly for Bridget that, though the cold was great, and the roads difficult, it would be cruel to keep her away longer. He greatly regretted that he should be unable to stay at least a few weeks with them at Rithycombe, but business of great urgency called him in an opposite direction, he grieved to say.

Martha repeated all this carefully to Sir James, as he sat by the hastily-lit fire in the quaint old parlour, which somehow had lost something of the cheerful look he remembered. Also she told him the messenger reported the travelling coach stood ready packed before he started, so that any day, any hour now, might bring the mistress back. All was ready for her. Mistress Bridget had seen to it herself, poor lassie!

"And how is Mistress Bridget, Martha? Grown out of all knowledge, I expect?"

"You may say that, sir, with truth; though I say it as shouldn't, there's not a fairer maid in Somerset, nor a better, but, Master Jem, she pores

over old books all too much, and has grown so quiet-like, she might be my grandmother! 'Deed, and it's no laughing mattter; the house is so dismal, a mouse makes me jump!"

Sir James rose, and cast a searching look around.

"No, the old place is not as I remember it; this was such a cosy, cheerful room, and now the furniture looks shabby and broken, as if no one cared."

"You are right, sir, 'tis sadly knocked about. What else could you expect when the rioters played ball with it? The screen that master thought so much of, designed by the aunt whose name Mistress Bridget bears, has got rarely broken. It's a mercy them soldiers did no worse harm here, though, than throw the furniture out of doors; but there, sir, I am keeping you from Mistress Bridget. She went down to the church awhile ago, with some leaves and things she'd been picking. See, the snow is beginning again. Do beg her to make haste; she'll catch her death of cold some of these days, like enough.

"There he goes! It does one's eyes good to see his cheery face again; but only think, I never told him about the captain! If only Mistress Bridget would take a fancy to *him*, there would be some sense in it; but things always go contrary, and I'd best hold my peace."

* * * * * *

Down past the straggling cottages, beyond the "Tabard" Inn, and the Rectory itself, Sir James' rapid steps soon reached the church which, to his surprise, was empty, and he was standing in the porch in some perplexity where to seek or find Bridget, when the flutter of a woman's cloak in the far corner of the little God's Acre caught his eye. A few more rapid strides, and the girl's cold fingers were in his, and he looked down into what he owned to himself Martha was right in calling the fairest face in Somerset. Ay! but with all the charm of the dark, soft eyes, and the thick, long curls escaping from her warm hood, the face itself was white and thin, with black shadows under the pathetic eyes, and a wistful droop of the lips.

Speedily Sir James announced himself, and told

her he could share her sorrow, for *her* father had been one to him also.

Bridget looked very fragile in his eyes, and he thought how altered she was from the rosy-cheeked, sturdy little lass he remembered, and he wished, with a sudden impulse, he had been home sooner to help her ; for that she had gone through a good deal was patent to the most casual observer. He begged her to come home at once, for the snow was now quite thick, and she willingly agreed, for she said to have anyone heed how she fared was something uncommon in those times ; not that she meant Martha neglected her, she was goodness itself, but as long as she had her meals regularly and went properly to bed, Martha was quite content, and hardly knew how long the hours seemed between those functions. Then, looking down at the low mound at her feet, now covered with the White Queen's mantle, she told of the soldier's care for her, and his passing away at the Manor. She had not an idea what her parents had thought of the matter; news had so seldom come, her mother of late being unable to write :

but Sir James saw at a glance that she was worrying herself greatly as to Madam's displeasure, yet at the same time aware it was the best that could be done.

"Of that, Bridget, I have *no* doubt," said Sir James, "and your mother will feel the same. It was a brave man's good heart that prompted him, and he had his reward in knowing he had saved you from harm. Poor fellow, that it should have ended so! But now, child, you must hurry, or we shall both be frozen. Now that I am home again, I shall take my place as usual here, and what man can do to help you and yours, will be alike a pleasure and a privilege to me. Don't cry any more, you look quite worn out. Uncle John would not know his little lass."

Bridget had not spent such a happy afternoon since her parents' departure; she had so much to tell James Fielding of the years of his absence, and of her late troubles. How greatly she missed the old Rector, who had been summoned suddenly to a distant relative shortly after Timothy's departure; his gentle presence and quiet companionship had

been the greatest comfort. How noisy and quarrelsome the village had become; how often in her ministrations she had met with cross words and scowling looks. Of Timothy's strange absence, and the fear she felt he had come to some harm doing her service.

Then Sir James told of his long wanderings abroad, and the strange places and things he had seen, and how now, when he hoped before long quiet and peace would be restored to divided England, he had returned home with his children to Fielding's Court; of his hope that Bridget would soon see them all; they were full of fun, and so on, so on, until the shadows began to fall fast, and he rose to go, promising to return early in the morning, and see if any further tidings of Madam had arrived.

Martha was very loth to see him go, and declared there was no sense in it. Why could he not use his old room as of yore? She had made it all ready, but Sir James was not to be stayed, and went briskly off for his horse.

Perhaps it was in consequence of Bridget's

words, perhaps it was all too evident, but the cheery greeting that used to be his from all about was missing, as he passed some idle men, who stared rudely at him; and his pet aversion, old Nan Crane, stood right in his path and uttered some ugly words not fit to hear. But he was no hot-headed boy to take notice, but a man, fully and keenly aware of the terrible state of the country. So he strode on in silence, troubled not a little at the state of affairs in quiet Rithycombe.

The man who brought his horse out from the stables of the "Tabard" Inn, where, in consequence of a loose shoe requiring attention, he had been obliged to leave him, touched his hat respectfully, and said he was glad to see him back again.

"Your face I know," said Sir James, giving him a keen glance, "but your name I forget."

"Hal Scott, your honour, the same as won the grinning match the year you came of age, when we *were* allowed a few games without being whipped at the cart's tail, or fined a week's wage."

"Ah! I remember now, but the Hal Scott I

used to know was a good sort of fellow, not a hanger-on at taverns."

The man's face flushed, and he looked downcast.

"What can a poor fellow do, Sir James? There's no work doing anywhere, and the missus is for ever worriting. The fellows here would give me no peace if I kept aloof, for you see, I know too much, and if I turned sober and *told*, they'd murder me."

"I see—a matter of courage—God save England from such cowards!"

Hal Scott was left rubbing his head doubtfully, lost in a feeble wonder what Sir James had meant, with the ugly word *coward* weighing him down with a very unusual feeling of shame.

Chance words at random sent, sometimes hit the mark. A day was yet to come, when with brave head bent low, and heart on fire, a thanksgiving that those words had found some soil to grow in, went up from Sir James' lips to the God above.

Bridget's voice had quite a cheerful ring in it as

she asked Martha to help her fold the napery, made from the thread she had spun so busily during her mother's absence ; and it was indeed a goodly pile for one pair of hands to have turned out. Now the wheel was stood back in a corner, and the quaint old dormer-room struck very cold. In vain had Martha begged leave to light a fire there; indeed, when first the severe cold began, she had set alight to the dry logs piled ready on the hearth, without waiting for permission, but Bridget had been so disturbed at her doing so, so really vexed, that at last she had promised not to do so again. The girl said, with no maids at hand to help her, she would not have such trouble taken ; she should sit in the hall when cold, the parlour she quite shrank from, it was too large and lonely all by herself.

Many hours, when not at work, she spent at the dormer window, watching the winding road, dreaming her own sad thoughts.

Next day was grey and cold, with the roads heavy, and the skies threatening; if Madam was not well on her way, she would surely be storm-

stayed. Sir James rode over as he had promised, stabling his horse this time at the Manor, and stayed as long as he could to get back in daylight.

So a few days passed, and still no tidings came either from Madam or Timothy, and Christmas was at hand.

A sad festival for Bridget, but not as lonely as it might have been, for again Sir James braved the cruel weather, to spend a few hours at the desolate Manor. A smile curved Martha's lips as she heard his firm tread crossing the hall, and she hastened to spread a tempting meal—that spoke well for her catering powers—in the warmest corner she could find. Outside, the wind went shrieking by with a terrible biting sting in its touch, warning folks another fall was close on its way; the clouds were one uniform leaden hue, snow lay piled in heavy drifts, and icicles hung from the roofs.

With coat collar to his ears, great wadded cloak to his feet, thick veil over his face all sprinkled with powdered snow-flakes, Sir James would have made a splendid Father Christmas, and nothing

but his sorrow for Bridget would have made him venture out on such a day; he begged Martha's pardon humbly for coming in in such a mess. Not that she minded, he could not come too often to please her, and she hoped her mistress also.

In the red light thrown by the logs, Sir James, Bridget, Martha and Joe sat talking of olden times and happier Christmases, when the Yule log had burnt for days, and the long tables at the Manor groaned with their heavy burden. When maskers and mummers had held high revel, with the wassail bowl circling freely; and puppet shows, rope dancing, jigs, and country-dances had been the evening amusements, crowning days spent in bear-baiting, horse-racing, bowls, wrestling and grinning matches on the village greens, weather alone permitting.

"Talking of grinning matches, Joe, what a wreck that fellow Hal Scott has become, a regular drunken sot, and yet I remember him as hearty a lad as you would need to see; and what a splendid grinner he was, to be sure; that double grin of his was unique."

"Ay! Master Jem, and a deal of time he spent over that same diversion, practising some new twist of his lips and jaws that should help him win the prize. His backers were awful proud of him, and the betting was rare and heavy when Hal Scott entered the lists; but it unsettled him like, and brought him into doubtful company. And after all such games were put down by Parliament, when Mistress Bridget here was a wee thing, why, his occupation was gone, and he just took to loafing, which ruined him. I don't think he's bad at heart, but so easily led; those that are unscrupulous make a tool of him, and by playing on his fears, compel him to take his full share in their wickednesses."

Bridget was very much interested in hearing of these old time sports, of course unknown to her, and wondered if the like would ever be allowed again.

Sir James declared they would, at no distant date, and a good thing, too; it kept the idle out of mischief, and prevented the industrious sinking too much into a groove.

He recalled to Joe's mind the Christmas Day of 1644, decreed by the Long Parliament to be kept from that day forward as a solemn fast, under heavy fines, and how the nation had rebelled to such effect, that one short year only, and this senseless law was repealed.

All were sorry when he rose to leave, he made so light of the ride and the cold, none of them quite realized it was by no means a pleasant, easy thing to do in such weather ; but knowing every foot of the way, and being very careful, the danger was nothing to what a stranger would have found it. It was indeed necessary to keep to the high road, where the snow stakes were fairly frequent, and leave the bridle tracks alone, and the former winding frequently amongst the hills, would have made the way long and tedious, if the hope of helping Bridget had not greatly shortened it in fancy.

There was a wild track called the Witches' Ladder, leading up from a gloomy gorge in a very lonely part, that went from Rithycombe to Fielding's Court almost in a bee-line, but that required

summer light to be safe, and was impossible except on foot.

The little Fieldings, dressed in their best, were waiting eagerly for their father, when at length he threw back the heavy door, and entered his own cheerful home. The youngest girl, Mona, ran eagerly forward with warm slippers, whilst Ralph, the eldest lad, a tall, slight stripling of fourteen, poured carefully out the simmering posset, over which he had been keeping most careful guard.

Round him, about him, on him, the happy children swarmed, whilst aunts and cousins smiled in the background, waiting ready for what they knew would be a right merry evening. And so it was, a happy time for all, full of fun and frolic, with sweet voices and gay laughter keeping a Merrie Christmas amongst the holly wreaths.

If Sir James' thoughts strayed often to a lonely figure seated in a fire-lit hall, in the silence of an almost empty home, he would not let such private feelings cast a shadow on the children's glee at having him again with them at home.

VIII.

THE BLACK BOOK.

"I hold it cowardice
To rest mistrustful when a noble heart
Hath pawned an open hand in sign of love.
—KING HENRY VI.

YES! That dark speck crawling on the road *was* a coach, making straight for the Manor. Wrapped in a thick shawl, Bridget watched a few minutes more, then ran lightly down to warn Martha, set alight to the fire in her mother's room, and calling her close companion, Rough, hastened out to the garden gate, long before the heavy vehicle had entered the avenue. Madam was looking out as the chariot drew up, and a cold chill ran through Bridget as she saw how changed her face was. Life—hope—seemed to have gone, only a listless quiet, and indifferent air remained. That was what struck the girl on the moment as she threw her arms round her neck, and burst into a passion of tears.

Madam's calm did not alter; though her soft hand stroked Bridget's face gently, the strange apathy was unbroken even for a minute. Quietly she entered the Manor, spoke pleasantly to Martha and Joe who, tongue-tied, had no word in answer, and had passed up the shallow stairs to her room above, long before Bridget's choking sobs had ceased as she watched her father's valise and other possessions carefully carried in.

Her uncle was very good to her, his own heart was so sore he could truly feel for the poor child, and putting his arms gently round her, bade her cry in peace, it would do her good.

Then Martha found her tongue, and asked what ailed her mistress, was she ever thus?

"Most ways as quiet; now and again some chance thing rouses her, and she seems quite herself, then that passes and she cares naught. But it is only a matter of time, our doctor says, after the illness she has had, we must have patience. She has talked so ceaselessly of you, Bridget, I marvel much she did not rouse up more. We have been storm-stayed for days, and she has

fidgetted much; indeed only this morning with all her old peremptoriness insisted on our moving on, and a weary time we've had; most expensive, too, constant relays of horses, not always easy to get, and in spite of hot bottles, so cold for ourselves, I feel half frozen. Last night we should have been here, only our pole snapped and that hindered us, so now I must move on to-morrow, or lose my appointment. There, child, now you feel better, don't you? Suppose you run up and help your mother as usual, and remember for your comfort she's much better than she was, poor soul."

An hour later Bridget descended to the hall from which the sound of voices reached her ears. Her mother was in bed, inclined to sleep; she said Bridget might go down and get something to do, it was not good for maids to be idle.

Her uncle smiled kindly at her, as she came forward and drew a low stool to his side, where after her greeting to Sir James, she sat and listened to their talk. Thomas Melville had scraps of later news than had reached them; he took a

keen interest in things in general, and had many friends on both sides. It was a real pleasure to find such a good listener as Sir James who, seated in the shadow of the settle, could watch Bridget's rapt face as much as he chose, which meant a good deal. He asked her uncle what he thought of the Committee of Safety, formed of twenty-three persons elected by Lambert and the other officers on the 26th of October.

Thomas Melville shrugged his shoulders, and fumbling about in one of his many pockets, produced a crumpled paper from which he presently read aloud the following :—

"I do hereby swear, that I renounce the pretended title of Charles Stuart, and the whole line of the late King James, and of every other person pretending, or which shall pretend to the Crown or Government of these nations of England, Scotland and Ireland, or any of them, and that I will, by the grace and assistance of Almighty God, be true, faithful and constant to the Parliament and Commonwealth, and will oppose the bringing

in, and setting up any single Person, or House of Lords, and every of them in this Commonwealth."

"That's the oath all the members of the Committee—some say twenty-three of them, others twenty-eight persons—were sworn in. Fine-sounding words doubtless, but who has the slightest confidence in the Committee thus formed? Monk reinstated the Rump Parliament for his own ends, and they are equally divided as to opinion whether he covets Cromwell's post, or aims at a Stuart King. Inscrutable man, with his silent tongue and secret schemes, he is really at present the pivot upon which the Nation's welfare turns. Lambert has gone northwards to meet Monk's army from Scotland, and it is said he will be fairly mad when he hears the Rump is restored again. I had the good fortune to have a paper given me to-day where we baited the horses, but I never looked at it; very likely there is nothing fresh in it. Perhaps, Sir James, you would like to see it; the light is none too good for my old eyes. Eh! what have you found, man, you look delighted?"

"Why, just think, here's one notice saying Lambert was abandoned by his troops and taken prisoner. Then further down comes another, saying that on hearing the Rump Parliament was restored, Lambert's *own* troops put him under arrest, and have sent him, with a strong escort, prisoner to the Tower! There! Is not that grand news?"

"Capital. If that milksop man, with his selfish aims, is out of the way for a bit, and Monk shows a little activity, there is a chance for peace at last, and the kingdom is in such a hopeless state they will clutch at anything. I would I were at Monk's elbow to give him a jog. What, are you off? Won't you stay and sup?"

"I must away, but I am most thankful Madam has returned in safety. Mistress Bridget, you will see me shortly, fare you well! And you, sir, a prosperous journey to you!"

"Thanks; and any news I hear I will tell the child to pass on to you, though it will be very stale before it reaches you."

* * * * * *

After Thomas Melville's departure from the Manor, and the brief whirlpool of excitement consequent on Madam's return had subsided, the days passed very quietly; except for Sir James's frequent visits, and scraps of news, there was little doing.

The weather was so severe Bridget could rarely get down to the village, and when she did so, Nan Crane was sure to waylay her with such curious menaces and hidden threats, the girl began to dread the sight of the bent figure and shrivelled face, and made up her mind the old woman was going crazy.

Her mother rarely noticed her absences, or, indeed, showed any interest in things about the house, so that one day when Bridget sat in the old settle, in front of a glorious fire, reading from her treasured ancient book, she started violently when Madam touched her on the arm, and asked her what she read so intently.

Bridget held it up in silence, quite unprepared for the sudden start her mother gave.

"Your great-aunt's book; however came you by it, Bridget? I did not know it was in the house,

see," and she turned back to the fly-leaf, "Bridget Conyngham. Her Boke."

With manifest curiosity Madam examined the clasps, and turned one or two of the yellow leaves.

"An Undiscoverable Deadly Poison, and its Antidote." "Melancholy and Its Cure." "A Lover's Receipt for Securing his Lady's Love." "The Art and Alphabet of Magic." "Witchcraft in Various Forms."

These were a few only of the many headings. Madam read one or two of the recipes, then the flicker of interest and memory died out, and with a tired sigh she sank into her high-backed chair, and gazed at the burning logs.

The book was in Bridget's hands that afternoon as she walked briskly down the avenue to the village; sickness of various sorts was very prevalent, and her time was occupied in trying to help and cheer the sufferers.

The smugglers had been making daring and successful raids. The Whistling Witch had been often heard on wild nights, and reckless spirits

were abroad in all parts. The illness increased, deaths were frequent, and Bridget's fame faded. The villagers began to look on her with suspicion, and openly spoke of her as a witch.

Black looks, rude words—nay, more threatening ones were used to her, when one gloomy day little Fred Smith died all in a minute under her evil eye!

No good to protest and say it was convulsions. They knew better, and should put a stop to it somehow before all their children were killed to suit *her* pleasure.

Bridget left the village, sad at heart, by no means understanding the mutters she had heard, for up to now no whispers even of the great witch persecutions going on all over the land had reached her. If only she had mentioned the matter to Sir James or Martha, they would have taken alarm at once, and implored her to keep at home. Her mother she did tell, but she seemed to think nothing of it, until late that evening, when she roused up suddenly, and asked Bridget to bring her the old black book she was always perusing.

"Be quick, child, bring it at once; let me see it burn *now*. I never saw it until you showed it to me the other day, and with my poor head I quite forgot it was no fit reading for you. I only just remembered it again this minute; for days I have tried to puzzle out what it was I had to say, and couldn't remember. Now hasten, child, before I forget."

"One minute, mother; what do you know of the book? It is surely valuable."

"Your father told me the old tale, and said it always worked ill to those who used it, and it has more lives than a cat. It belonged to your father's aunt, a regular wise woman, and very beautiful. She suffered much from heart disease, and all the family were devoted to her, looking on her as almost a saint. She declared she had found the black book in an old chest, and had taken possession of it, adding recipes of all kinds that she had come across. Some horrid report got about that she was a witch, and she only escaped being burnt as such by being found dead in her bed. It was the sudden shock of the noisy crowd

who came thus to repay her countless deeds of kindness that killed her. There has been a Bridget Conyngham for so many generations that your father would have you so called, though I did not like it at all. For God's sake, child, hurry, and let me burn it now at once. I trust your having read it may be unknown, for I tremble to think what may happen if the villagers see it in your hands. Superstitious-mad they all are, and always have been, and we are two helpless women. Oh! dear, dear! I don't know *what* to do, and James won't be here to-morrow."

Bridget was silent; the book had gone often to the village, and only that day Nan Crane had glared fiercely at it in her hand. Neither did she want it burnt, that could always be done.

Could it?

The habit of obedience prevailed, however, and with reluctant feet Bridget mounted to her dormer chamber, and opened the press she kept the book in.

Gone!

What had she done with it? Surely she had

not dropped it? Like a flash of lightning it came over her, she could remember nothing more of the queer old volume after that vindictive glance from Nan Crane! Alas! Alas! In vain she searched every available or likely place. Hunt all she might, it could not be found, not even in the mantel cupboard, though, as a last resource, she opened that. She was pulling it to again when the idea occurred to her that often she had heard raiders were more savage if they found nothing than even if their gains were small, so she took a few of the loose coins, and a thin spoon, and, going to her mother's bedroom, concealed them in one of the hollow uprights of her four-post bed. Then it suddenly struck her that the mantel-cupboard opened too easily; either the wood had shrunk, or else the spring was a little slack; whilst she was about it, she might as well find another place of safety for the treasures, so on the impulse of the moment she removed it all elsewhere, and closed the secret panel.

Rapid in her movements, she was speedily down in the hall again, and, to her great relief, found her

mother had sunk into a doze, and even when she awoke, the book episode had vanished from her mind entirely. Not so from Bridget's. A queer feeling of dread kept knocking at her heart. She thought of little else that evening as she listened to the wind's wailing in the dark night outside.

Rough was very fidgetty; do what she might she could not keep him quiet; he trotted from door to door, whining and growling in a most unusual fashion.

Rendered uneasy at last by his restlessness, Bridget went to speak to Martha in the adjacent kitchen, and as she stood talking to her in the firelight, first one masked figure, then another, came swiftly in through the scullery, until five big men filled up all the vacant space.

Bridget went white as a ghost; her feet seemed suddenly to have grown to the floor, and not for the life of her could she force her tongue to ask their business there. Martha screamed and shrank into a corner, and another shriek came from the hall as the intruders pushed Bridget roughly aside, swung through the door, and tramped noisily and

heavily up the stairs, declaring loudly treasure they had come to find, and treasure they would have ; they knew well there was plenty hidden, and it would be the worse for all if they did not find it.

Rough flew bravely forward, and fastened so fiercely on the leg of one man, he yelled with pain, and a comrade, raising his heavy bludgeon, brought it down with such cruel force on the faithful little head, that a helpless, lifeless bundle of fur dropped prone at Bridget's feet, as she ran to her mother's side, and she had lost one more trustworthy friend.

Madam was gazing in affright at the crape-covered faces of the robbers, who simply ransacked the place from garret to cellar. Bridget's heart nearly stopped beating when a voice suddenly whispered in her ear :

" I'm here to do what I can for you, Mistress Bridget, though it's as much as my life is worth ; tell me how I can reach the big bell in the turret, and for God's sake be quick."

The girl told him in such hoarse, trembling tones none would have recognised them, and added " Oh, Hal Scott, I did not think you would rob us."

"Not I, my lady, though *he* called me 'coward.' You saved my boy for me, and I'd die for you, but betray me not, I pray!"

Then the fierce robbers came shouting down the stairs, vowing life or money they would have!

Madam clung to Bridget's arm and implored her to say where she had hidden their treasure; she did not know or else she'd give it up!

Bridget held her tongue, and watched the men come tumbling down, when loudly, clearly the great Manor bell rang briskly backwards, the signal of a fire. The men started and stared, but still the iron tongue pealed forth with its well-known alarm, and a great thundering fell on the heavy entrance door.

Disappointed, baffled, and muttering evil threats of returning another night, the intruders departed, one shaking at Bridget's head, to her horror, that quaint black book of recipes she had lost, and calling her savagely "Witch!"

When all was quiet and silent save for the swinging bell, Bridget learnt that old Joe, with a club in each hand, was responsible for the thunder-

ing on the door, that with the bell had proved so efficacious, and she praised him much; but he said the idea was not his, he should never have thought of it; someone in the dark outside, as he was coming home, had thrust the clubs into his hands, and bidden him bang for his life.

They barricaded every door they possessed, pulling heavy furniture against several, and Joe promised solemnly not to close an eyelid all night.

Madam cried helplessly like a child, but at last consented to go to bed if Bridget stayed with her, and though the girl longed to be downstairs, keeping Joe up to the mark, she lay down beside her mother and kept quiet.

Very gently had she lifted little Rough's body and laid it on a chest; how she should miss him no one knew, and to lose him in such a way?

The fire-bell ceased at last, and Bridget wondered dully no one had come to their aid, but there! in such unsettled times perhaps it was not odd.

Morning came at last, and found them all tired and weary, yet the business of the day had to be attended to.

James Fielding did come over, and was in a terrible way when told first by Joe, then by Martha, and finally by Madam, who seemed quite energetic, of the fright they had had.

In vain he implored them to come over to Fielding's Court at once, and let him take care of them. Madam refused obstinately to leave the Manor, declaring the robbers must have fully satisfied themselves there was nothing to be gained by coming again. After a long conversation on this and other matters, Sir James sought Bridget in the now little-used parlour, and begged and prayed of her to say she would marry him, and let him have the joy and pride of caring for her welfare.

The girl's look of surprise was very genuine, as she stood twisting the signet ring. She said she had never thought of such a thing.

"Oh, Bridget, *do;* it maddens me to think of you here all alone, when I want you so badly, and love you, dear, so much. Indeed, indeed, I would make you happy, and surely I am not so hateful but that you could like me just a little? Your

mother wishes it, and she says it was the dream of your father's heart, so pray listen to me, child, and forgive the blundering words that come from an honest heart. Yonder brave fellow saved you once, and *I* have known you all your life, and for all my hopes of happiness and home, do not, do not, say me Nay!"

In vain he pleaded well and truly, again and yet again. Bridget would not say "Yes," and at last, when the short winter's day was closing in, after he had himself seen to every possible precaution, and left his own beautiful collie as guard, Sir James had to ride sadly away, with his bright plans all upset, and a weary ache at his heart, as he looked forward to long, lonely years before him.

His children? Yes, of course he had them, but just now he wanted something more; and though he had plenty of county work to attend to, as a favourite magistrate, he had built up such a home castle of happiness, the downfall was very great. Neither did he think he could reopen the subject to Bridget; her manner had been so decided it was vain to think she would change.

IX.

FORGOTTEN.

"Whispering tongues can poison truth ;
And constancy lives in realms above ;
And life is thorny ; and youth is vain ;
And to be wroth with one we love,
Doth work like madness in the brain."
—S. T. COLERIDGE.

"TO-MORROW is my birthday, mother ; am I not getting old ? Martha wants to make me a cake, but I tell her No. I'd rather not."

"Your birthday, child, are you sure ?"

"Why, mother, yes, it is the 20th of February. Was it as cold a day as this when I was born, do you remember ?"

"*Remember !* Is it likely I should forget such a day as that ? What nonsense you talk, Bridget ; let me see, that would be how long ago now ?"

"Twenty years to-morrow, mother."

"Twenty—and the twentieth day of the month. Dear, dear ! I was to remember something *very*

carefully when those two dates came together; but *what?*"

And Madam sat bolt upright and looked round the hall for inspiration. "Something so particular it was, too. I wished your father had told me of it before. I can't imagine what it was. Call Martha, Bridget; perhaps she can help me, my poor head is all in a fog. Oh! Martha, what happened on the day Mistress Bridget was born?"

"*Happened*, Madam? Why, that was what happened, and enough too, to be sure! Dear! What a flurry we were all in, and poor Master like one demented, wandering up and down all over the place. I mind well when I carried the baby to him, just for him to have a peep at her, how, all of a sudden he began to shake as if he had the palsy, and I daren't let him take the child for fear he'd drop her, though I had real to shout at him, for the church bells were making such a row, I could not hear myself speak, and he was even then a little hard of hearing."

"Dear, dear, you don't help me at all. I was

to be sure and take care, *great* care, he said, and I don't know of what, but it was something to do with Bridget's birthday; it is *most* annoying you can't help me at all."

Madam's tone was decidedly querulous, and both women tried to soothe and pacify her, not having the faintest clue to what she wanted. After a little doze she woke up suddenly and said she had been dreaming of the black book—a horrid dream; she was thankful to awake and remember the book had been burnt some while ago. "Your father said it carried a curse with it, and he was not the only one of the family who wished it had never existed. After your aunt's sudden death, a great search was made for it, and as it could not be found, it was supposed to have been burnt with a lot of papers your grandfather destroyed when your father was a lad. Tell me, child, how you, her namesake, came by it; only I *know* it is burnt I should not have a minute's peace, and I think it must have been something about that, that your father warned me against. Now where did you find it?"

"In the dormer-room, mother, the day you went to Ellesmere."

"And that was Aunt Bridget's own room; it does seem queer. However, no matter, the thing is gone."

Bridget felt quite a hypocrite as she listened in silence, but as she could not say where the book was, she thought it best to hold her tongue, though to-day her mother seemed more like herself than she had done since her return home.

Only Martha and she herself knew how difficult she had been, and what patience she required. Never once had she alluded to Bridget's hasty marriage, and the lonely time she had had. Not quite realizing her condition, Sir James had asked her consent before speaking to Bridget, and not once, but many times had the girl wished from the bottom of her heart that he had done no such thing, for Madam having agreed, she could not, or would not understand that Bridget had said him Nay; and she harped on at the subject in season, out of season, until it was worn nearly threadbare.

Her confidence that Bridget would shortly come round, so inspired Sir James with hope that again he put his fate to the touch, only to have a gentle but decided refusal. Sore at heart, and very sad, for love for Bridget had taken a firm hold of the honest man, he ceased coming so frequently to the Manor, only insisting that two trusty men of his own selection should always sleep there; and that their doing so should be as little possible burden or extra trouble to the household, they left always at seven a.m. for their day's work, returning again at sundown.

At Fielding's Court the inmates noticed a little sharpness crept into the master's voice, and some said he was not easy to please in those days, others that he was cross and irritable. No one was more aware of the quickness of his temper just then than Sir James himself; little things worried him as big ones never had, and often it was all he could do not to flare out before the children in a way that would have surprised them. They grumbled greatly at seeing so little of him, for to sit still and think, with the sting of his great

disappointment rankling ever in his mind, was more than he could stand ; he must out and away, be the weather what it might, and tramp till he was tired out.

Why could not Bridget like him? That was the question faced him morn and night, when with his sore heart he scoffed at himself for caring so much, like any love-sick lad, and bitter thoughts of Reginald Markham tried hard to gain a hold. But against that poor, degrading idea, the better nature of the man fought and prevailed. Where might Bridget have been but for his timely aid? With no thought of himself, he had done the best he could for the girl ; need Sir James grudge him her grateful remembrance? *Love* surely it could not be — pity and gratitude together had erected a shrine around his memory ; doubtless that as yet had not begun to fade, but that every pulse in her young heart had still to be aroused, as surely as Sir James tossed to and fro, in uneasy slumber, or tramped the lonely lanes, he knew and felt for certain.

But was *he* the man to quicken those heart

beats?—there lay his doubt. Slowly, surely, the conviction grew and strengthened that friendship such as theirs rarely changed to warmer sentiment, and that for his own self-respect he must try and be content never to be anything more than the old tried friend, ready and willing to give what help and support he could. And *that* he was indeed, but very likely no need for it would now arise; peaceful times were surely coming on the troubled land.

Bridget missed James Fielding's visits not a little, and she looked so tired and worn Martha felt quite worried about her. A long letter from her uncle had arrived on the 15th, written from London, and contained stirring news.

He said under the pretext of honouring Monk (now rapidly nearing London), but in reality to spy upon him, the Parliament had sent two of their number to watch and report his every word and movement. One of them was a personal friend of his own, from whom he had had much information. These men found the great general at Leicester on the 22nd of January, and from

that hour, night and day watched him as a cat does a mouse, even to the length of always making, if not finding some hole through door or wall to look and listen. Not very high-class work, according to *his* lights, but still their orders.

The inscrutable man went his own way and kept his own counsel as usual.

It spoke for the state of affairs, Thomas said, that the very day before Monk reached London, there was a fight in the Strand between the cavalry and the infantry. An united army had long kept down a divided nation, but the nation was now united and the army divided.

Lambert had broken prison, and called his comrades to rally round him, but was captured and reimprisoned speedily. Great excitement prevailed as to Monk's policy.

Thomas Melville asked Bridget to tell Sir James these important news; he hoped by now they had heard something of Timothy, else he feared they never would. His own plans were too uncertain to mention; he might remain in London, or go home, but the latter would be lonely work, and he

had many friends in town. The man who brought the letter was bound next for Bristol, and Bridget spared one of her gold pieces to get him to carry a letter to Mrs. Markham from her, asking what she knew of Timothy, and *when* she had seen him. The man promised faithfully to do her bidding, and Bridget felt relieved. Up to now she had had no one she could send on such an errand. Joe could not be spared, and besides he was too old.

Madam kept very alert all that 19th day of February, asked questions and volunteered remarks as she had not done for long. She expressed herself as greatly pleased with Bridget's spinning, felt the texture of the linen with a critical finger, and said she had greatly improved both in evenness and quality. Nay more, when evening came, and the two sat close to the dancing flames, she told Bridget more of those sad weeks before her father's death at Ellesmere than the girl had yet heard. Once begun, it seemed a relief to her to go on talking, though every now and then a queer gap came of something she had forgotten.

It was very comforting to the daughter's heart to hear how her father had longed for her, and how constantly she had been in his mind.

Bridget began once to say what an anxious time she had had, and how grateful she was to Timothy for his constant carefulness, but Madam looked *distraite*, as if her mind refused to attend to anything she had not herself taken part in. Still she *was* better, and with care might soon be well again, Martha insisted, as later on, when Madam had gone to bed, she came in, and found Bridget alone, seated in her father's great old chair, crying as if her heart would break. She could not help it, she said, as her former nurse, with many endearing words, tried to get at the bottom of the trouble. She was so lonely!

Martha assured her she had only to say one word, and that could all be put right, and a happy home be hers for the rest of her life, but Bridget only shook her head.

Then the faithful maid suddenly resolved on a bit of plain-speaking, and kneeling down beside her, she spoke softly to her as her mother might

have done, and asked her if she was right in refusing Sir James for the sake of a memory only.

"Not for one moment, child, would I ask you to forget that brave, honest soldier; treasure up in your heart his care for you to your life's end. But you only saw him twice, and you are young and strong, with maybe a long life before you; surely, surely, the two claims need not clash, your dead lover can have his own place, and your living husband his. Write and ask Mrs. Markham for her opinion, if you doubt the soundness of my advice, but for God's sake don't, *don't*, throw away all your life's happiness for the memory of a dream. Sir James is too proud to keep on asking, but remember he was your father's choice in the long ago. Now, dearie, go to bed and sleep in peace, only think once and again of your old nurse's words, for they are true."

* * * * * *

"DEAR NEPHEW,—

"It is only a few hours ago that I heard to my great relief you had come to the end of your

wanderings, and had settled down again at Fielding's Court.

"A man brought your uncle a newsletter this forenoon, and said he had lately been at Rithycombe with a London letter for young Madam Markham, who got him to go out of his way with a letter to her mother-in-law near Bristol. Now I can give a shrewd guess as to part of that letter, for I make no manner of doubt at all, it is chiefly to ask her after Timothy.

"Well, I was cudgelling my brains on the subject, when John came in in a fuss, and said a man he knew was going your way, and would carry a letter for me. For weeks and months I have waited and wanted this chance to send word to Rithycombe, and now to have it on the very day I hear you have returned is most opportune, only it minds me to write in such haste, I fear the sense will be none too clear.

"Timothy started from here on the Doctor's cob, the very day the first poor witches were burnt and drowned, as you will have seen in the paper, and the whole town was in an uproar. I had been

so upset by losing my faithful Margaret through that wicked Mathew Hopkins, that I could not have sent you a letter by him, even had you been at home. Well, hours afterwards, the cob came trotting back, with her knees cut, and her shoulder bruised. I was alone with the maids, with every door bolted and chained. The Doctor was out on his rounds, and the streets so disorderly from wretches shouting and yelling 'Down with all witches! Hurrah for Hopkins, the saviour of the people!' that I dared not leave the place to find someone to help us, or let the maids go either, for very likely they also would have been kidnapped as poor Margaret's accomplices. I give you my word, when I heard that horse come rapidly up to the door, my knees just knocked together, and my teeth chattered, so frightened was I that it meant harm to your uncle.

"It was very late when the Doctor, tired and weary, came home, and he had come in for some sights that made him shudder. Off he went, however, at once, with the coachman and lanterns, and

at length, on the common, a few miles off, they found poor Timothy. One leg was broken in two places, as well as several ribs, and he had severe concussion of the brain. They brought him home here, of course, by as quiet ways as they could manage, and he has been with us ever since. Timothy's leg had been unset for so many hours the inflammation was very great, and at first, your uncle feared it must come off. The poor fellow was, however, such a good subject from having been steady all his life, that by long and slow degrees the swelling went down, and the bones united. But it has been a serious, tedious business, and the ceaseless fret Timothy has been in, ever since he was quite clear, has thrown him back tremendously. He can now limp with a stick, and will start for home the minute the Doctor allows him. Owing to the severe weather and the distracted state of the country, a trustworthy messenger could not be found, though indeed we tried, knowing how fearfully anxious Mistress Bridget must be. Now, will you give her Timothy's respectful duty, and explain how it comes about

that he has been detained here. The messenger told me that Madam Conyngham was home again, but that the villagers were a rough set, and had such an evil look about them, he was glad to get quit of the place.

"God keep you from Mathew Hopkins and his crew; he turned this quiet place into a perfect hell, and from the day I heard your uncle had up and said he held not with such cruel and wicked work, he has been a marked man, and I have never had a minute's peace when he was out of my sight, whilst that ruffian stayed here, neither did I venture beyond the garden gate: but that is long past now, he has been touring in other places, and alas! this morning I heard he was making straight for Somerset. Timothy is nearly mad with fear that Mistress Bridget will come to some harm, and on hearing you were home, he begged me to ask you to give an eye to her, and if possible, keep her from the village. He is so excited, I can't make out *what* he fears, and the messenger has just sent in word he can wait no longer; if my letter is not ready, he must

go without it, so in haste, dear nephew, fare thee well.

"Your loving aunt,

"EMILY JOHN."

* * * * * *

In due course, and as it happened, this letter reached Sir James on the 19th of February, after the darkness had fallen, and for hours he paced up and down his dining-room, lost in thought.

One thing was quite clear, and that was, to-morrow, Bridget's birthday, he would ride over to Rithycombe—he had not been there for quite a week. He would take the road through the village instead of keeping to the upper one as usual, and then, if there seemed anything brewing or disturbed, he would *insist*—and the word grew tall as he said it—on Madam and her daughter returning to the Court with him. *Here*, he could keep them safe, *there*, he could not.

The villagers were not likely to be any more evil-disposed to-morrow than they had been to-day, and after then, he would indeed be on his guard and take every precaution, though what

particular fear there was for Bridget, he could not imagine. Ah! What about shutting the stable door after the steed is stolen!

In all his many plans and thoughts, he had forgotten the love of talk, and of being, even for a few brief minutes, of importance. As he paced his comfortable room, happy and secure in the belief all was well, the man who had brought his letter was holding forth at the "Blue Anchor" Inn, but a few miles from Rithycombe, to a rough group of men, telling them all the latest news, of course, with the great item of Hopkins' arrival in the county, and the fine times they might look forward to in consequence.

One of the listening men was Nan Crane's idle, good-for-nothing husband, Tom, who very speedily bid his boon companions a surly good-night, and tramped, for him, briskly homewards, with evil thoughts and wicked ideas in full possession of him.

X.

THE SPEED OF DESPAIR.

"'Once more, art thou determined?'
'I am. Nor is there aught which shall impede me!'
'Then Heaven have mercy!'"

—BYRON.

THE long smouldering ill-feeling against Bridget might have died down completely in time if the rumour that Mathew Hopkins had crossed the Somersetshire border had not suddenly aroused a sort of frenzy against all witches, and their own so-called one in particular; and an eager desire to show themselves clever enough to do without him and his heavy fee, stirred all the worst passions and cruel vices into activity. Starvation from failure of crops, long-continued drought, idleness and laziness on the part of the farmers themselves, had culminated in a terrible state of affairs. Only the taverns flourished, flourished on the ruins of men's souls and bodies.

The night the news reached them, through Tom

Crane, that the Witch-finders were drawing near, a group of vile spirits gathered in a small private room of the "Tabard" Inn, and worked up into a perfect frenzy by Crane's wicked suggestions (for which he was principally his wife's mouthpiece), that Mistress Bridget, with her Evil Eye, was at the bottom of all the trouble and misery that had now been their unhappy lot for long, swore in their drunken fury that, the slightest loop-hole given them (and Nan Crane could *make* more than one if she chose), the morrow's sun should not set before *their* witch's spells should be broken for ever, and a handful of ashes, grey and white, be the only remains of the young, fair girl they had known all her life.

Hal Scott, less hardened than the others, vainly tried to stem the tide, and muttered Little Madam had been very good to him and his. They called him coward and poltroon, and swore they'd keep an eye on him that he did not turn king's evidence. The villains were just in that inflammable state, they would side either way, following the strongest leader for right or wrong.

The hours wore on, the darkness deepened, and when the worthless crew reeled home, making night hideous with their shouts and songs, only *one* man lay prone on the dirty floor, sunk in a drunken slumber, and that man was Hal Scott, Bridget's advocate.

* * * * * *

It was early morning, and the hush of God's rest lay deep on the land; the mysterious forces of the night had not awoke, the charm of the pure day still held them in thrall, that would last until the silver moon's sceptre was lowered, and her glittering train had all paid their court, and were left with myriad eyes to wonder again and again how man, in his brief day, could spend his life on trifles, and cast not even a heedless thought on the Eternity above.

So still, not a twig quivered, not a dreaming bird twittered; nothing stood in the way on earth or the air above, to check or alter a sound.

Whatever broke the silence would carry far, and must be heard with wonderful clearness, take what shape it might.

* * * * * *

Out in the darkness of night, clear in the still, silent atmosphere, from the old church tower in the vale rang out a muffled peal. No human hands were nigh; the doors were locked and barred whilst the cords swayed and strained, and the plaintive dirge went on—sinking, rising, falling—in solemn cadence, slow and steady, with the strange muffled effect of cotton-wool, making them sound miles and miles away.

The villagers turned on their pillows, starting awake in surprise, the old folks pretending not to be astonished; *they had heard that music before* —when little Mistress Bridget was born. Ay, and before that truly! But there! It was a thing uncanny, best not spoken of aloud; there were sure to be those about whose ears were all too sharp, and luck was bad enough, without tempting worse.

There were others who muttered darkly that it was a sign from Heaven; the time and the day had come.

Only fools would let such a chance slip, another they might not get.

Up at the Manor mother and daughter slept in peace, and heard not the weird music that would perhaps, in the heart of one, have aroused a warning echo, and stirred a dormant fear into activity that might have proved a safeguard.

Madam slumbered soundly, and Mistress Bridget in her dormer room dreamt of her loving father, as in fancy she wandered in bygone years, without a thought of the storm-cloud hovering close above her innocent head.

Was it Kismet or by God's good providence that the warning passed them by?

Would it have altered aught, or only taken their courage away, had they guessed at the trouble close, which yet *must* be faced and met, woven as it was into their life's pattern, to be worked out to the end, even at the cost of their hearts' blood?

* * * * * *

The "Tabard" inn was close to the quaint old church, and the solemn peal roused Hal Scott from his slumber on the floor. Roused him sufficiently to sit up and gaze around at the overturned chairs, the empty bottles and battered tin mugs all any-

how, no-how, in the confusion of the dirty room, with its heavy atmosphere of smoke and drink.

Sit up. Ay! but with senses dull, and memory blank, listening quite calmly to the deep cadence of the bells, then a wide yawn, a great stretch, an unsteady stagger to leaden feet, and a pause—whilst through his clouded brain the muffled boom forced its way, bringing a dull sense of wonder whose knelling was taking place.

Little Madam's, of course; had he not heard it all planned—*When? Where? By whom?* Ah! friendly deeds are never lost; how quickly he remembered now the frequent kindnesses shown him by Mistress Bridget and her family. For he was too late; no doubt by now the thick smoke from the dry wood those wicked men had by them, would burn with fierce rapidity.

Too late! Too late! The bells were stopping now; all was over!

Ay! But if so, why this stillness? Surely there would be a great trampling, and shouts and yells of satisfied fury.

There was another boom now; how it startled

him, though it was but the striking of the church clock close by. One—two—three—*four!*

God save us all! Had he heard aright? Like an animal at bay he glared around, with bloodshot, distended eyes, then tottered from the room, and stumbled along the low passage to the paved court-yard hard by, almost forgetting, poor fool, what he meant to do. One minute more, and drunken slumber would again have chained him body and mind, but the sight of great faggots of timber put all ready to hand, revived in a flicker his wandering senses. Another stumble, and he was on his knees by the pump, with his head well under the spout, sousing himself with all his strength.

Again and again the *douche* was repeated, the cold water worked its cure, and a sober, shivering man stood up in the gloom of the early morn, with one strong purpose well alight—to do his utmost to foil the wicked plot that would so soon be put in practice.

Where could he go for help?

Why, there was but one man who *could* do

aught—the man who had called him "Coward." It was his only chance, but had he time? Twelve long miles away, over a rough road that wound and wound in useless curves between the sheltering hills.

Hopeless, was it not, almost, to try?—for on foot he would have to fare.

Had the Manor stables been full, he would have helped himself without a second thought, but only one horse occupied the stalls now, and *he* was dead lame. Yokels are not good pedestrians as a rule, they slouch along just as it pleases them; continuous steady walking, with even time and pace, is a thing almost unknown to them. Supposing he did the distance in three and a half hours, that would bring it to half-past seven, and then the return on such a rough track, mounted, would mean one and a half, if not two hours more.

They were early folks at Rithycombe, and in this case, if the men should cool off in the light of day, Nan Crane would keep them up to the mark.

Burnt as a witch, that fair young girl; it would be a thing horrible, unknown, unparalleled. In all

the witch-burnings and murderings of late, the victims had been old and wrinkled, with most of life behind them, and with many sins upon their heads.

The Witches' ladder! *There* was his chance. Dare he face it with its evil repute, and many tales of woe?—and yet it would cut off miles of his tedious way, and save a lot of time. He knew the spot well, most did, though few had ever set foot upon the rugged boulders that, piled in fantastic heaps, gave just a foothold up the sides of a certain precipice on Hollow Common, above the dark pool of the same name. The stones had slight depressions in them, and bore a strange resemblance to a narrow perpendicular ladder. A cold shiver ran through his frame as he thought what *might* happen if he turned dizzy half way up, but try he must; he could not keep the road and be in time to get help at all. If he fell, well, the water would be his grave, for no one knew its depth.

There was the clock again, and he had lost a quarter of an hour of his precious time. He could but do his best, and no doubt fail at that; and so

he started, as quietly as he could, for the village would awake all too soon without extra aid from him. On past the silent cottages, by the old grey church out into the whispering lanes, over the dreary fields.

Down in the vale, deep in shadow, stood the Manor House, its inmates all unconscious of harm or spite, with the ancient trees standing like sentinels, as in the days of old.

He got along well as far as he knew his path in the dim, uncertain light, and felt quite courageous when he deliberately left the winding road, to follow the slender track that pointed straight as an arrow to that narrow dip in the hills, where the cliffs and the ladder stood. Gradually the incline increased, and it was with labouring breath and several pauses, that he at last stood in the cleft in the hills, very dark at that early hour in the morning from the narrowness of the fissure and the overhanging rocks in this particular spot. The cleft widened a little further in, to leave room for the dark, still pool, and there before him stood the famous witch ladder!

With beating heart and shaking limbs he began the toilsome way, that looked so simple till you came to climb it, but really was steep and awkward enough to try a novice sadly.

His hands were cut and bruised from clutching the sharp edges, and his feet were already so sore and blistered, every step was pain and grief. An awful temptation assailed him to give over, and let matters take their course; then realizing rather suddenly that to *return*, to *descend*, was out of his power, he shut his eyes to steady his nerves, and again toiled upwards: but it grew worse, for the top steps distinctly overhung.

Let his body swing into space whilst he tried to drag himself over yon knife-like edge? Impossible!

The faint light was reaching him now from the other side, and just as he felt utterly hopeless, he saw a foothold at the *side* of the beetling rock, and dangling by it a bit of rope. Dare he trust to it? —would it hold?—was it rotten?—would it prove only another form of destruction? Deep breathings, bright eyes, seemed around him; and what

were those dark forms suddenly arising from the ground above, and coming close to the edge to push him over!

No, no! Life was sweet, the rope *might* hold, and in the strength of despair, he seized the frayed cord tight with one hand, steadied himself by the other, made a wild leap upwards by that sideway footstep, and stood safe at the top, in a rough bit of common, with a few poor startled sheep staring in mild surprise at his sudden intrusion.

Great drops of sweat were rolling down his face as the poor fellow paused a moment, to recover his breath. All around him the green hills, below him, well in the distance, stood out the old church of Rithycombe, and yonder to the west Fielding's Court. He must on—for time was precious, but all was plain sailing now!

A few yards more, a rolling stone, a hasty slip, a sharp stinging pain through his ankle that caused him to fall prone on the ground, without a soul in sight.

* * * * * *

"Someone asking for me at this early hour.

What sort of a fellow, Susan, should you say? The country is very disturbed."

"A decent sort of body, Sir James, but ragged and dusty, with boots cut all in pieces, and clothes sadly stained. He came riding on a poor jaded beast that he said he found straying on Hollow Common, for he had hurt his ankle, and could walk no more. He said it was a matter of life or death, else I would not have troubled you, sir. There! He wouldn't wait, you see, for me to ask your leave, ill-mannered loon; belike 'tis all a parcel of lies!"

"*No*, your worship, it's true, on my soul; but first would you tell me the hour?"

"A quarter past seven of the clock."

"Marry! to think of the time I've been, and I started just after four. Please, sir, order your horse whilst I tell you the tale, and the best you've got in your stables. Don't you know me, sir?"

"Why, as I live it is Hal Scott! Be not so peremptory, my good fellow; tell me your errand first."

"They are going to burn Mistress Bridget, of Rithycombe, as a witch, your honour, early this

morning, to save Mathew Hopkins the trouble; but if I wait to tell you all it will cause a long delay. See here, my lord, you shall hang me up by the heels if you find I've told you wrong, only for the good God's sake ride away at once! I've been drinking, did you say? Yes, but not for hours. I'm worn out," and a hoarse sob shook the rough voice, "and not fit for the likes of you; but *murder* will be done if you don't hurry, murder that, 'coward' though you called me, I've done my best to hinder."

Impressed in spite of himself by the man's manner, and alarmed beyond measure, Sir James lost no time now in giving his short, decided orders for two serving men to follow him at their best speed; and but a few minutes later saw him booted, spurred, and fully armed, riding at a brisk canter towards Rithycombe.

Better, perhaps, than poor, ignorant Hal Scott, could he realize the awful peril Bridget stood in, if once the notion she was a witch had gained credence, and for his love to be in such terrible danger set his heart on fire.

XI.

BURNT AS A WITCH.

"Who by aspersions throw a stone
At the head of others, hit their own."

—*Quotation.*

THE morning of Bridget's birthday rose bright and clear, with quite a touch of coming spring about it, a refreshing change after the dreary winter.

The clocks were nearing eight o'clock when Martha most reluctantly awakened Bridget, sleeping unusually late after her previous evening's agitation. The girl's long hair fell over the snowy pillows, and she looked so young and fair, a tear dimmed her nurse's eyes as she gently touched her.

"Mistress Bridget, my dear, a happy day to you, child, and many of them. You are wanted in the village at once; there's a poor fellow cut himself so badly they think he'll bleed to death, and have come tearing up for you. Like their impudence,

I say, when they have been so glum to you this long while past, and I had a good mind not to tell you, only the woman made such a fuss."

"Quite right, Martha. I'll be very quick; unhang my cloak, yes, and give me that white serge I had on last night; there now, no one will ever see my hair is down with my hood on, and I'll run all the way. A cottage on the green, you said. All right."

It was indeed a horrid cut, from a blunt chopper hacking a bit of firewood. Bridget did her best, and having bound it up very tightly, prepared to start home.

But the smart of the wound was hard to bear, and the discontent of the past few months had gone too deep amongst the ignorant people for matters to end thus.

Excited by fear, no sooner had the girl left the sufferer's bedside than the poor fellow sprang up, tore off his bandages and declared she was burning him with her accursed hell fire; he was *glad* to think his last chopped bit of wood would help to roast *her!*

Out sprang the blood in jets and streams; fright did the rest, and as rough hands were laid on Bridget, the labourer fell back dead.

Oh! the uproar that ensued, the angry clamour, the savage gestures, and brutal threats.

"It ran in the blood to deal with devils," shouted they; "they'd have no more of her black magic, no more murders should be done with *their* consent."

Almost before young Madam knew what was happening, they had dragged her forcibly to the tiny village green, where white-plumaged geese fled in haste. A horde of yelling fiends trooped alongside, fastened her with stout cords and rough words to a handy cattle-post, and piled dry brushwood round her in a close mass higher than her knees, all with incredible speed.

So this was the end; the wood was so dry it would burn fiercely, quickly, and the suffering would soon be lost in suffocation!

So thought Bridget as she stood waiting for her fate, with that strange loss of power in voice and limb she had felt in their night alarm. Only

then did she remember how true in every particular had come the vivid dream that had possessed her on that hot summer's day, a few months back.

Perhaps even then there might have been a little delay, and the tide have turned in favour of Bridget, if Nan Crane had not come running along bearing a flaming brand. Then came another mad rush, cruel, evil fingers thrusting branches into the torch to assist in firing the faggots. One wretch poured oil recklessly over the wood; and cheered and danced in glee as the blue flames rushed heavenwards, and the yellow and red came curling behind. Smoke in a dense column for a moment obscured the slender figure in the middle, and the air being still and clear, rose up straight to a good height, catching the eye of a galloping horseman, whose steed was flecked with foam, and sides pricked by frequent spurrings.

"Good God! Am I not in time? Ten thousand curses on the brutes!"

In went the sharp rowels again, crash came the heavy whip, and maddened almost into frenzy,

the beautiful creature flew over the ground in breakneck style. Up the village street, past the "Tabard" Inn and the quaint old church, to the dark crowd gathered on the village green, whose every thought and eye were centred on the stake.

Sir James Fielding rose high in his stirrups, and shouted with all the force of his powerful lungs, but so great was the noise made by the rabble, and so absorbed were all their faculties, not a head turned in his direction.

Laying his crop about him with a will, the rider tried to force his way through the pack of people, for the girl's eyes were closed, and the smell of burning was suffocating. The horse refused to face the flames, and plunged and reared wildly; but by backing him hard, a passage was partly cleared to the burning pile, though the crowd tried to block it, and he trampled some of the smouldering wood underfoot.

Sir James set his teeth hard—now or never! *Nothing* would bring the horse into such a good position again, and on foot he would be powerless.

With an awful pull on the curb, he forced the frightened creature to back a foot or so more, closer to the faggots, leant clear over them, and with all the might of a true heart and a strong arm, grasped firmly the stake and swung the girl across his saddle. The chance he had reckoned on, that the fire would have burnt nearly through the base of the post, probably rotten to begin with, was correct, and it snapped off short with the strain upon it, else this would have been impossible, though it might have come wholesale from the ground.

Shouts, yells, curses, blows, even kicks were liberally bestowed by the surrounders on the rescuer and his steed, whose neck they tried to hang on; but the creature kicked out with such a will he left several motionless on the ground, and sprang wildly away with his double burden, in spite of clutching hands, and threatening forms, and went like mad along the Manor road.

Two men servants came galloping up, shouting "Fielding! Fielding!" but their aid was useless, unneeded. Sir James had Bridget safe, though,

as he cantered to the Manor House with his unconscious burden, he did not know if it was a living or dead woman he was supporting. He smelt charred all over, and from the way his hands smarted, ached, and throbbed, soon became aware he was considerably burnt. Bridget's serge dress was discoloured, but there were no visible scars on the face, which looked white enough to have been carved in marble.

His horse was done; trembling violently in every limb, with great beads of moisture dropping from him, with head held low and snorting breath, he still galloped along; but the strides were getting slow, and would soon fall into a weary trot.

Sir James' hands were terrible; exposed to the air as they were, it was just pure force of will that kept them round Bridget, but the sharp pain made him feel faint and dizzy. Would he—could he—hold out to the Manor?

Ay! If he died in doing it!

In at the old iron gates the poor over-ridden beast turned of his own accord, and up the leafless avenue he knew so well. Here Martha was wait-

ing with a look of frenzy on her face, and her hair all flying in the wind. Long before they met, she called out shrilly had he seen her lady?—for such a noise had come up from the village, she knew not what was afoot. Joe was not at hand to ask, and Madam was no use.

Then she caught sight of his helpless burden, and the strained look on his face, as he nodded to her Bridget was there. He reeled in his saddle as he did so, and fear and dread unspeakable filled Martha's heart, as he hoarsely asked her to lock and bolt the entrance gates, and then follow him to the Manor. Just as she clanged them to, the Fielding servants rode up, and told her what had happened, and that it was just a miracle their master had been able to lift such a dead weight from the ground; that they would see to the gates, and be at the house as soon as she.

So they were, and a good job, too, for though the horse stood still enough, Sir James dare not loose his hold from Bridget for fear, helpless as he was, he should let her fall. Neither could he dismount. Carefully, quietly the servants took

the poor girl from his arms, and carried her into the old hall, returning to give their master almost as much help, for by now, his hands were simple agony.

Bridget still lay motionless on the settle, and Martha would not have her carried upstairs, for Sir James could not be there, and she guessed it would be needless torture to him not to see if Bridget was alive or suffocated.

Most sensible women knew how to treat burns and scalds in those lonely times, when it was a question of hours before outside aid could be procured; and Martha's simple remedies gave untold relief to Sir James, whose coat sleeves had to be cut open to bind up his damaged hands. The burns were terrible to look at, though not deep; all the skin was gone some way up the arms, where the flames had crept in between the cloth and flesh. Revived by a strong stimulant that Martha insisted on his taking, Sir James was soon able to direct what was best to be done. He made one of his servants write out arrests for the principal ringleaders, whose names Hal

Scott had given him. He had another request to the Excise officers written to ask them to see these arrests carried out immediately, and report the same to him. One man was sent riding away with these, and the other to the nearest doctor, with instructions not to return without one.

Martha trembled, frightened to death, and at last ventured to say was it wise to take such strong measures in such fearful times? Sir James looked very stern as he said it was his only course; if he let those brutes alone and they went with their lies to Mathew Hopkins, or acted again for themselves, no power of man might save Mistress Bridget.

Crush them now utterly, completely, whilst that wretch was still at a distance, and all might be well.

The Excisemen were the only regular disciplined force available, and he believed they would willingly give their assistance, though the work would be quite out of their regular routine.

Without even the farce of a trial the wretches had attempted unlawfully to murder Mistress

Bridget; if she died they should swing for it, so help him Heaven!

Martha touched him gently on the sleeve—Bridget's eye-lids were quivering, and opened wide in a few minutes; down on their knees in thankfulness both sank, for they had feared the worst.

"Yes, Martha, take her upstairs now, if you can. Would that I could carry you, my love; bed is the safest place, please God she is not burnt much! There, Joe, you have come in just the nick of time to help Martha carry young Madam to bed. Tell me how she seems, my good soul, when you have undressed her, won't you?"

"Ay, surely you may count on me. Now, dearie, I am ready."

* * * * * *

Two hours had barely passed, all too long for Sir James' feelings, when the clatter of horses outside, and the jingle of a sword on the stones announced the arrival of the Excisemen, the leader of whom, a fair-haired young fellow, did not look very happy over his job. He came in for Sir

James' instructions, and said they were very sorry to be able to spare so few men, but it was useless sending any but reliable ones on such an errand. He quite agreed with Sir James it was the only course for the safety of Mistress Bridget, but he said if the plan failed what then could they do?

"We will leave that to consider until we needs must," said the baronet, deciding rapidly in his own mind there was nothing for it but that he must go himself with the men, and back up this nervous young man.

"You will understand, men, that we need to be quick and firm. With my cloak round me none will guess how helpless I am. The minute I give the order each two of you seize your man, the two oldest taking the first person, and so on in the order that this old fellow," turning to Joe, "points out. Secure their hands, swing them out and away; if you can't mount them behind you, make them run alongside; it will do them no harm, and I warrant you once the people of the village see we are in grim earnest, they will turn round and help us. There must be no time

for rebellion, or worse harm may come ; we are but a handful. That real old witch, Nan Crane, is the first I mean to secure under their own pretext of saving Hopkins trouble. Besides the attempt at wilful murder, I shall mention the men as her accomplices in unlawful deeds, and if that does not strike terror to the whole place, I'm not a Somersetshire man, but a changeling. We take the party to Dunstar, remember, and lodge them in the county gaol. Now forward!"

"You are not fit to go, sir, and that you know right well, yet it is a serious matter to manage without you."

"All right, Joe, give me a hand with my cloak, and then I'm ready, though I fear I needs must have my beast led. Two of you men must go pillion, for my own horse is too unnerved to mount. Martha, please bar the door."

Away they spun in good style, close together, with pistols ready, and eyes on the alert. The village was still in a bustle, women tearing about, and men in knots of twos and threes. The faggots lay smouldering on the bit of green ; no

doubt the bonfire had been fine, but the sight alone of the sticks made Sir James feel queer.

He made straight for the "Tabard" Inn, guessing rightly that whether as consolation for the failure of the morning, or encouragement for darker deeds yet to be carried out, most of the evil spirits, men and women, would be congregated there. He was right, and such a buzz of talking filled the stuffy room, no one noticed the horses pulling up, or the jingle of spurs, as they dismounted, so that all the Fielding party were well in the room, with the outer door guarded, before a single man noticed the intruders.

The legal preface to the warrants was lost in noise, then fell such a dead, sudden silence, Sir James' voice rang out clearly and distinctly, saying that by order of the Privy Council and with the authority of the Parliament of England he arrested as suspicious and dangerous characters, Nan Crane, the witch—Tom Crane, John Bowles, George Watkins, and William Smith—accomplices of the same, who that day had added one more crime to their long list, by burning Mistress Bridget

Markham, of Rithycombe, whose only fault, as known well to all, had been kindness to them and theirs. For the last crime in particular they were arrested and would be judged in due course.

"Do your duty, men!"

Like flint striking steel, the words rapped out; the women and men were seized, bound and swung by their collars out of the room in less time than it takes to write, Nan Crane making a hideous noise; and though there was a pell-mell rush from the room, in which many knocks and bruises were quickly gained, so sharp had the capture been that they had actually begun to ride away before the foremost bundled out. Again Sir James proved himself right; robbed of the ringleaders, who had dominated the others, the men looked sheepishly after them, muttering it was none of *their* doing, and the women began to whimper, and say it was awful to think they had killed that sweet young Madam!

Such was the state of affairs when a high gig came in sight from another road to that

taken by Sir James' party, and the old grey mare in the shafts pulled up gladly at the inn door.

"Why, what's all this to-do?" said the driver sharply; "what are you all loafing about here for? You've had a burning, did you say, and the Excisemen have taken the leaders to prison! And a good thing too. What did you burn, a haystack or a house?"

Silence—no one spoke.

Timothy went very white, and Mistress Markham laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"It was a person then. *Who*, I say, can't one of you speak?"

"*Mistress Bridget.*"

"And you live to say it, *cowards*, not men that you are? Oh! my lady! my lady! had I but been here!"

The veins stood out on the man's face, and his clenched hands were white at the knuckles, whilst a terrible look of hopeless despair settled on his features.

The sobs of the women were now supported

by the groans of the men, who said it was all the Cranes' doing; they hated young Madam like poison, and had worked on them so, they thought they were really doing the place a benefit by burning *the* one that was said beyond a doubt to possess the Evil Eye. *Now* they knew better, and would gladly walk miles to see Nan Crane suffer the same punishment.

"Ay! but she'd make a noise worth hearing, not take it so quiet-like and silent as little Madam, who had not even said she was afraid."

That was enough. Timothy could stand no more; with curses on them all, low and deep, that in her heart, the gentle old lady beside him considered quite excusable, he gave old Nell a cut, the like of which she did not often get, and they pounded away to the Manor in silence; it was no time for words.

Martha very cautiously opened the door, and started back in surprise when she saw Timothy.

"Why, man! I'm glad, real glad to see you, though it's but a sorrowful day you've come on. I thought it was the doctor, and I only waited

to throw another cover over Mistress Bridget and run down."

"Yes, it's me, sure enough, and I wish I was dead to have come too late. Was there *no* one to try and save her?"

"Timothy, my man, you could not have done more than Sir James has done, and is doing. God bless him for it! His head is worth any two of ours, and his authority will back him up. Now, come you in and rest, and please tell me who *you* are, madam, that have come on this day of trial. Markham, did you say? What! our captain's mother! How pleased Mistress Bridget would be if she knew! Timothy, what are you groaning about? Have you hurt yourself?—how lame you are, to be sure."

"Always shall be, that matters nothing. Mrs. Markham came to stay with Mrs. John, and as soon as they would let me come, she said she should accompany me, and pay her promised visit to the Manor, and here she is. Take her to a room, Martha; she must be tired out, but can't I just look at Mistress Bridget first?"

"Yes, if you choose, for one minute. Now, madam, please. Why! whatever *are* you doing?" as Timothy, after one glance at Bridget, as she lay in the spare room, covered his face with his hands and sobbed deeply.

"Poor fellow!" said Mrs. Markham. "Don't you see we were told she was burnt, and to find her breathing was too sudden a relief for him. Take courage, friend, whilst there's life, there's hope. Your mistress, how is she?"

"'Deed, madam, I hardly know, she is still asleep. I have been in several times, but she does not rouse, she was quite herself all yesterday, and took an interest in everything, stopping up later than usual, and I suppose she's tired out."

"I think we ought to awaken her, Martha; she must need some nourishment, but she has been spared some terrible hours."

"There, madam, there's the doctor's trap. I see it coming up the avenue; he will tell us if she should have her sleep out. Timothy will let him in, and you should rest."

"No, not whilst I can help you; take me to Mistress Bridget, and fetch him up."

The doctor examined the girl very carefully; she had some nasty burns on her feet and back, and her hair was like tinder, but they were mostly separate injuries, and not over a wide surface. The shock was as serious as the burns, and she had severe congestion of the brain, and would need the greatest care if she was to live. She would not be out of danger for many days to come, he feared, but youth was on her side, and she would have first-rate nursing, of that he had no doubt! He was so busy he could not come again for a few days, they would have to manage without him. He was turning to descend the stairs, when Martha asked him to glance at Madam, for she slept so late.

The doctor started when he saw her face, lifted her eyelids, felt her pulse, and shook his head.

"This is not sleep, my good woman, but coma; if we cannot rouse her, she will die. There is not a minute to lose. I am afraid I am too late now. This lady, will she help?"

"Of course, and I am well accustomed to illness in most forms, only tell me what to do."

"You have come off a long drive, I understand. Then I must beg you to take some strong cordial at once, and lie down on a bed for an hour, for you will have a heavy night of it before you, and will require all your strength. If you reject my advice, I shall probably have another patient on my hands, but I think you are too sensible a woman not to do as I ask. In the meantime, Martha and I will do our utmost for this poor lady. Did she seem in any way different yesterday?"

"Yes, sir, quite like herself; it was a pleasure to see her."

"Ah! Quite so! A sudden flicker up, too great a strain on weakened powers, and here we are! Now, madam, please go and rest. I will not leave without seeing you again."

"There is poor Sir James for your other patient, Doctor," volunteered Martha. "I expect he'll return in a fine state."

"No doubt. That man of his was telling me

as we drove here what a terrible to-do there had been—disgraceful! It is a mercy Sir James was in time; the man said, when he and his fellow came in view of the green, Sir James was hanging right over the burning faggots. He looked as if he must overbalance, and the horse nearly mad, just backed for those few seconds that saved a life, and then was off like the wind with his extra load. Now, please, to work."

And it *was* work too, hard work, the vain attempts by every means in their power to arouse the poor lady from her heavy stupor. Again and again they gave over, only to try afresh, but it was all of no use, and after a long hour the doctor went to tell Mrs. Markham so.

"She will live just as long as her strength holds out, and then die, most probably very quietly. You are not aware, Martha, of anything shocking or frightening her after she went to bed?"

"No, sir, nothing."

"You will need help. How can I best assist you?"

"Sir James' housekeeper would, I'm sure, spare us one of her maids if I could get a message there, but I've no one to send."

"I will manage it for you somehow, and now I must away. Send for me if you really need me, and if it is in my power, I will come. I have not been in my bed for three nights as it is. Ah! I hear horses; if it is Sir James, I'll give a squint at his hands. I hear him saying good-bye to the Excisemen. I hope he'll hurry."

Sir James looked utterly done as he stumbled into the hall, and sank on a chair, Joe and his own servant following behind.

"Well, doctor, here's a kettle of fish, but I hope we have trodden out the mischief. The village was absolutely quiet as we came through, and those wretched faggots had been carried off. How is your patient?"

"Mistress Bridget is as comfortable as her severe burns will permit; if fever does not set in, I hope and trust we shall do well *there*, but Madam is very ill, as Martha will tell you when I have gone; if you will let me see to you at once

and go, it will be a real act of charity! Don't think me fussy or fidgetty, but I have some life or death cases waiting for me, miles away, and I'm nearly dead beat."

"My dear fellow, don't bother over me. Martha can manage."

"Of that I'll judge. Wheugh! Well, my man, you must be of Spartan birth; why, you are suffering torture."

"Well I know that; the dressings slipped."

"Slipped—I should think they *had*. Now I shall have to hurt you horribly to get those rags off. I will be as gentle as I can, but I warn you it must be agony for a few moments. Ready?"

"As soon as you please, it will be the quicker over."

"Bravo! That's done, now I shall tie you up properly, and I positively forbid your stirring outside the door till I see you again. You have run an awful risk as it is; it will be wilfully throwing yourself away if you tamper with such injuries. You are sure you have none anywhere else?"

"Certain sure; my clothes were thick, and I was barely a minute. Thanks, doctor, that is ever so much more comfortable. Must you go? All right, I won't keep you."

"Now, Martha, you've something to tell me; out with it—is Madam dying?"

What a relief it was to the faithful soul to pour it all forth, her sorrow for the old mistress and her fear for the young. Timothy's return also took up time, but she had a good listener. Between pain and exhaustion Sir James was very quiet, and Martha chattered on, over and over again repeating herself in her agitation until summoned above to Bridget's room.

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XII.

HAUNTED.

"When troubles come of God,
And men are frozen out of work, when wives
Are sick, and working fathers fail and die,
When boats go down at sea—then naught behoves
Like patience; but for troubles wrought of men,
Patience is hard. I tell you it is hard!"

—JEAN INGELOW.

THE sun sank slowly in a crimson glory to bed and the moon came up in shining whiteness which, with all the deep shadows about, made such a beautiful picture, that busy and tired though she was, Martha paused at Bridget's dormer window to admire the scene without. She had come up for some fresh linen she needed, leaving Mrs. Markham by Bridget's side.

Sir James was installed in an easy chair in Madam's room, for to bed he would not go. Yes! It was very beautiful, but what messenger was *this*, wearing the uniform of the Roundheads, with nothing on his head?

Was fresh trouble at hand?

The moon rays glinted on the naked sword gliding noiselessly over the ground, shone full on the fair erect head, and lit up with an unearthly radiance, a face with clear-cut features that Martha recognised on the moment, as with steady, unfaltering pace that soldier figure came swiftly up the avenue.

"Now God in Heaven save us all," cried the faithful woman; "he has come for Mistress Bridget; it is a sure and certain sign."

Fascinated, powerless to stir, she watched the spirit figure drawing nearer, nearer, then just as he reached the velvet lawn in front of the dormer window, he seemed to fade and fade until there was nothing left.

Even then Martha waited to make sure there would be no re-appearance; satisfied on that point she hurried down, and in a whisper told her tale to Sir James, who nodded his head softly and said, "Faithful as ever."

He was beyond wonder, and could not well feel more hopeless of Bridget's recovery than he had done all day.

Still Madam slept her unchanging sleep, only the breathings were heavy and deep.

Timothy crept bare-footed up the quiet stairs, and touched the baronet on the shoulder. "A knot of men at the door, sir, asking for you. I don't know if they are up to mischief or not, but Hal Scott is with them, and they pray for speech of you."

"If Scott is there, I'll stake my life it's all right, and they are very quiet. Open the door, my man, I must see them in the hall."

It was quite a deputation that, with shuffling feet filed in, with such a hang-dog look of shame and despair, it was enough to make anyone sorry for them.

"Look here, your honour," said Hal Scott, limping heavily forward. "The matter is like this. My mates here are real sorry that they went so mad this morning, and knowing as I tried my poor best and failed, to save Mistress Bridget's life, they asked me when I crawled home this afternoon to act as spokesman for them, and to say there is not one of them but is truly ashamed and grieved for

that black deed of this morning. They feel as if the memory of it will haunt and curse them all their lives, and rightly too. So now, your lordship understands they would give their right hands gladly to call back this day."

"You all clearly understood that Mistress Bridget was dead, killed by your own acts and deeds?"

"Certain sure, your worship; it was your own words that told us at the 'Tabard' Inn," muttered one of the deputation huskily.

"I said Mistress Bridget had been *burnt*. I never said she was *dead*. Thank God she is alive though in great danger, and the burns are most severe. I am truly glad in these evil times that there are a few Somersetshire men left who are brave enough to be sorry for having played the coward as you all did to-day. You don't need me to say that the only brave soul in that wicked crowd this morning was the girl you have known all her life. If God in His mercy spares her to us, we shall need to be very careful of her in the future, and guard her well. Now shake

hands on it, comrades—Bah! what an ass I am! I have no hands to shake with—and swear from henceforth you will be her true men, come good or evil."

A deep murmur that came from hearts, as well as lips, responded promptly to Sir James' request.

"Never will *I* forget how I respect you all for coming here this night to speak to me! Now good-night and farewell."

"God bless your honour! You've taken a load off us, and we've had a lesson to last our lives! See here, sir, when we took them cursed sticks down we came on this, and one of us says as how Nan Crane threw young Madam's book into the flames, and that this is part of it."

So it was—dinted—blackened—bent—half a clasp of the old book of recipes.

Sir James had heard about that book once and again, and had hated to see Bridget reading it.

"Put it on that fire, my good fellow, that is the best thing to do with it. Good-night."

* * * * * *

The hours of darkness wore away. Joe slept in

his arm chair by the kitchen fire. The Fielding men-servants had been sent to the inn. Timothy went up and down stairs doing anything in his power, with a heart as heavy as lead ; and the two regular watchmen snored in concert in the hall. Mrs. Markham had unwillingly consented to go properly to bed ; Martha dozed by Bridget's side, and Sir James, in too much pain for sleep, had charge of Madam.

It was very quiet, so still that two villagers knocked repeatedly at the kitchen door before their summons was answered by sleepy Joe. Hal Scott's wife said they had come to see if there was nothing they could do to help at such a terrible time, and the old man assured them there was plenty for all to do. The fires below were out, and he was so stiff from the rheumatics he could hardly move.

What power a cheerful fire has!

The hall looked a different place half an hour later, with the table cleared from yesterday's irregular, snatchy repasts, the tiles washed over, the logs blazing cheerily, and a meal carefully

arranged. Places could only be put for two, alas!

Timothy had done his best in the kitchen, so that there was no difficulty about hot water, greatly to Martha's relief, when, hearing the sound of sweeping and scrubbing, she came down to find out who was so busy. Mrs. Markham was quite fresh, she reported, and would soon be down. Bridget had had a bad night, as was to be expected, but was quiet then. Madam looked a shade whiter, and Sir James was sound asleep in the chair beside her.

Probably her entrance disturbed him, for soon they heard him moving about in Squire Conyngham's dressing closet. He spoke cheerfully, when shortly he appeared, thanked the women for coming, and said how nice they had made the place look, after all the dirty boots of yesterday. He and Mrs. Markham made real friends that anxious day; trouble draws people close together.

Greatly to their surprise, the doctor paid them a visit; he said he could not rest for thinking of them, and though there was nothing fresh to try or

do, it was a great comfort to them to see him. Again he examined Sir James' hands, and gave a snort of satisfaction as he did so.

"That's going on all right, at all events; now I'll tell you you were within an ace of lock-jaw yesterday, and then there would have been a pretty to-do. You keep indoors now mind, sir, and if it is possible I'll be round to-morrow. There must be a change in Madam before then; if she lives through the day, she will probably pass away before midnight. Mistress Bridget is no worse, though I cannot truthfully say she is any better; still, in her case, to be no worse *is* hopeful."

Late in the afternoon two maids from Fielding's Court arrived, nice, steady women, ready to do their best.

All day long groups of villagers paced up and down the avenue, watching the windows anxiously, on the look-out for any tidings. The sun was sinking fast when Sir James and Martha took up their posts at the dormer window, which commanded the best view of the avenue, and silently waited. The red light had faded, the silver beams

were touching the edges of some storm cloud when the soldier's figure came in view. Again the same calm air of conscious power, the dauntless bearing, the unhurried pace, a pause at the edge of the velvet lawn, as if waiting for someone or some signal, and then the slow fading away like last night. Both watchers drew a deep breath, and Martha muttered she did not like it—it was too uncanny.

"Strange, passing strange," was Sir James' comment. "I never held with ghosts before, and should not now, only for seeing him. It would be cruelty to tell Mrs. Markham; we will just watch and see how often he comes."

Madam died about eight that evening. Only the loud breaths coming slower warned her nurses the end was near, and as the doctor had prophesied, it was very peaceful when it came. Two or three days passed quietly away, and then came one so critical for Bridget, a few hours would decide. All those hours the doctor sat beside her, his finger on her pulse, his watch in hand. If collapse came on, all would be over.

Not for one moment of that day did Martha leave her. Sir James sat outside her door, and Mrs. Markham went in and out.

Little groups of waiting men and women stood about all day, though rain fell heavily, and they must have been soaked.

Every evening at sunset the guardian figure had appeared, and now, as the light faded, Sir James signed to Timothy to follow him, and together they mounted to the dormer chamber, the only window from whence they had discovered the apparition was visible.

There now before dusk the figure stood waiting, this time with folded arms and bent head, and he did not fade as usual.

In a whisper Timothy said all the village was talking of the soldier who walked in the avenue.

For quite a quarter of an hour they watched him ; then the folded arms fell, the bent head was raised, and the fading began. The last faint outline had just gone, when Martha came hurriedly up, gasped out breathlessly, "It is all right," flung her apron over her head, and began to sob piteously.

Yes, it *was* all right. From the very brink of the grave Bridget Markham recovered. Her mother had been laid in her quiet grave, with a great following of the scattered gentry for miles and miles around. It showed the esteem and respect, also pity and sorrow, felt for the old family of Conyngham.

One of the Covenanted clergy read some prayers, cut and clipped from our beautiful Liturgy, it is true, but better than none, beside the open vault; then the concourse dispersed, and only the immediate house-party returned to the Manor. All this had taken place some days before signs of consciousness returned to Bridget, and the frequent mutters of "blood-stained hands" ceased.

Her nurses had no clue to what she alluded, but it seemed to press heavily on her. To their untold relief, when clearness returned she asked no awkward questions, only smiled and thanked them, and took everything else for granted. Very quietly she accepted Mrs. Markham's presence, and it was from her lips she heard of her mother's death. The soldier figure came not again to the

edge of the lawn for years, but so many had watched him passing, it was no matter of hearsay amongst the villagers.

Sir James made a good recovery, and his popularity was so well established that when he pleaded at the County assizes that Hopkins should be forbidden all the neighbouring towns, his suggestion was carried with no difficulty, and the wretch had to take himself and his brutal gang much further away than he desired.

As for Nan Crane and her following, had they been set at liberty Lynch law would probably have prevailed, and they would have been torn limb from limb.

But Sir James never intended they should be free, and though, as an act of clemency in such reckless times, their lives were spared, they had a term of imprisonment before them that would see out some of their lives.

* * * * * *

The April sun was playing hide and seek amongst the hills, laughing at the swelling buds, tickling the young sap in the trees. Never had

the Manor House in the vale looked better, Sir James thought, as he rode up the whispering avenue. It was a week since his last visit, for he had grown weary and sad, this long time past, by never being allowed to see Bridget. It was her whim, and nothing they could say or do, would make her say she would see Sir James. He felt it keenly as she grew stronger, and he heard of other people being admitted to the sick room, and the same answer always met his eager request—"Not to-day."

He knew from the doctor what a strange gap in her memory there had been at first, and while she kept weak, all were most careful not to excite her in any way, but when strength and health came back, and, except for her short, curly hair, she looked like the girl of a year ago, then her persistent refusal to see Sir James did seem odd.

Mrs. Markham assured him it was some strange freak that would surely pass in time, but even she lost hope as March faded into April, and April drew to a close, and still that prohibition remained. By some means Bridget always managed to be

aware of his approach, and she was gone from hall or room long before he entered it.

The old lady hated to see the hurt look on his face of late, as after one swift glance round, he would again miss the one he wanted to find; and she thought so deeply over the matter that one day, after his last visit, she took the law into her own hands, and told Bridget in simple words the whole history, as far as she knew it, of that terrible day to them all—the twentieth of February.

She saw the girl turn very white, and visibly tremble, as she spoke of her rescue from the stake, but she took no notice, and went on quietly with the tragic tale to the end. Then silence fell, broken at last by Bridget crossing the room to kiss her before she vanished upstairs to the dormer-room, where again she had taken up her abode.

"Martha, I can do no more for good, or ill. I have told her *all*, though the doctor said it would be a mercy if she never knew or remembered the burning; if harm comes of it, blame me not."

"Blame you, Madam? Likely *that*, when you've just been a mother to her, poor child! I think myself it will be a relief to her to know all, and that it was just because there was that queer blank in her recollections, she got puzzled, and made a mess of things so far as Sir James was concerned. It will come all right now, dear lady, I feel sure; only wait and see."

* * * * * *

Sir James swung himself clear of his horse, utterly unaware that bright young eyes were watching him, noting with surprise the hoar frost colour of the hair she remembered black, and the lack of spirit in his greeting to Timothy, waiting outside.

Up the few low steps, through the thick oak door into the lofty hall we all have so often entered. Then a sudden flush of red, as a slender figure was noticed in the window, an eager word—"*Bridget!*" two quick strides with ringing spurs, and the girl's small hands were in a grasp so firm and true, the like not often felt.

Bridget looked up in the strangely-moved face

stooping over her, and then her eyelids drooped until the long lashes rested on the thin cheeks.

"Forgive me; until a day or so ago, I never knew or dreamt what you had done for me. I thought the fire was all a fever-dream, and that in reality, I had truly seen you kill a man, for what, I did not know. You were riding, and he fell under a blow from you, but that no one else heeded this—to me—wicked act of yours, only made me feel sure you had done that sort of thing before, and ever after, when I heard your name mentioned, I saw the mark of Cain upon your hands. Once, long ago, I watched you from the staircase talking to Mrs. Markham, and your hands—to me—looked red with blood, so I felt no doubt at all that what I remembered so clearly had occurred, and that to see you, or to touch you, would drive me nearly mad. Mrs. Markham tells me that if indeed in my unconscious state I *did* distort facts —and somehow I want to think she is right— the reality was an act of bravery I indeed can never be sufficiently grateful for to my life's end. Only to you could I tell this, and the terrible

horror it gave me of you. Now I know the truth, from my heart I humbly ask you to forgive me."

"*Forgive you*, child, you tempt me far. What if I say between you and me such a word must never be named? The little that I did was done for love of you—for naught else care I; would that I might have you for my loved and honoured wife. Pause well before you answer, for if again you say me Nay, be it so. I will never ask you more to cast in your lot with mine. Should you in your mercy and—see how I stoop my pride—maybe only in *pity* on your part, give me Yea, then as God is my witness, never, never to your dying day shall you have cause to regret it. One word about my hands, and I have done. You are right, they are often an awful colour; the slightest thing that disturbs or excites me, and they flush scarlet, and burn like furnaces. It may or may not pass in time, the doctor thinks, and is, of course, the effect of the burns."

He loosed her hands as he finished speaking and stood back.

Outside, the birds twittered, the sun danced. Inside, a slender girl put out two trembling hands, with a half-sob, and a whispered "*Not* in pity, James," and Love was Lord of all!

* * * * * *

"I was reading a letter from Uncle Thomas when you rode up; he asks me to let you hear the news, so you had better read it, it has been slow of coming."

Thomas Melville wrote to say he had only just heard of her mother's death, and the terrible trouble his niece had been in. He could not bear to write about the latter; it made him shiver even to think of it. But for Hal Scott's gratitude, and Sir James Fielding's courage, he would by now have been a desolate man indeed. Mrs. Markham had written him a full and graphic account, for which he thanked her much, but that under the circumstances the rescue had been effected in time, was little short of miraculous. He hoped soon to take the road, when he should make straight for them, but just then, events seemed marching so fast, he felt he must remain in London for the

present, and see what came of it. That he was getting old, and in comfortable quarters, had something, doubtless, to do with his laziness, for which he trusted, as she was in such good keeping, Bridget would forgive him. He said:

"When at last Monk broke silence as to his plans, and declared for a free Parliament, the whole nation seemed wild with delight. He was thronged by thousands out of doors, shouting and blessing him. The bells of all England rang joyously, the gutters ran with ale, and the sky for five miles round London was reddened by countless bonfires. The soldiers alone were in a gloomy, savage mood, hating both the title of King, and the name of Stuart. The fury and despair of fifty thousand fighting men was no light thing to manage, but General Monk could do it. Now what would be his next move?"

He hoped soon to see Bridget, and find her well and strong, and with his greetings to Mrs. Markham, Sir James, and the servants, ended his newsy letter.

How pleased was Mrs. Markham to find her

venture so successful, when later on in suspense and doubt she ventured into the hall, from whence the sound of voices had kept both Martha and herself on tenterhooks for long. What a happy time followed, and how many arrangements were made that sunny day before Sir James rode homewards.

One thing Bridget stipulated for most earnestly, that she should not be asked to leave her dear old home; she said to do so would, she thought, break her heart, and she did not feel as if she *could* live anywhere else. They might call her foolish and absurd, and no doubt she was both, but she felt the power of the old place so strong upon her, that she often fancied even when she was dead, and in God's mercy, safe in his Paradise above, she would often be drawn to earth again, at least in spirit, to visit her much-loved home.

Sir James made no comment or objection to this great wish of the girl's, and so they settled that for the present at all events, Mrs. Markham should reside at Fielding's Court, where the charge of the children would be a real pleasure to her, and Sir James at Rithycombe, with frequent visits be-

tween. Martha and Joe would return to their own cosy home, and Timothy permanently remain at the Manor.

Neither was Hal Scott forgotten. Sir James had a good post in his mind, that would give him plenty to do, without coming in frequent contact with the powerful temptations of the "Tabard" Inn. How simple it seemed after all, and what a lovely light shone round the timbered house as Sir James, with glad heart and smiling lips, rode from it that April evening, younger by many years than when he drew rein there that morning.

XIII.

THE BELLS FINISH AND THE GHOSTS CONTINUE.

"Bell! thou soundest merrily,
When the bridal party
To the church doth hie!
Bell! thou soundest mournfully;
Tellest thou the bitter
Parting hath gone by!"
—LONGFELLOW.—(*From the German*).

LATE on the evening of the 30th of May, 1660, a man hurrying along the Strand, nearly knocked over another, coming in the opposite direction.

"What *you*, Peter, ten thousand pardons, what a pace you go at. More detective work on hand, eh?"

"Name it not, I beg, the loathsome task to watch and spy from morn till eve. Well, what think you of the world to-day, now *you* are uppermost? Will it last?"

"Last, man, yes, our time and a bit beyond, but such doings just bewilder me. I never saw the like before. The city has gone mad wholesale. I rode along part of the route with the townsmen

yesterday to meet the King, and they told me the whole road from Rochester to London was just the same as the bit I was on, one continuous line of booths and tents that looked like an interminable fair. Flags everywhere, bells pealing, bands playing, wine and ale literally flowing, with troops of morris dancers, mummers, tumblers, wrestlers, grinners, performing dogs, dancing bears, puppet shows and the like at every turn ; until one's eyes ached with looking, and one wondered whence in such a short space of time all these performers could have been unearthed from."

"How far did you go?"

"Only to the village of Blackheath, where the army was drawn up to receive the King."

"Ah! I heard of that *contretemps;* as things are, it was not politic."

"Not politic call you it? I could use a stronger word, it took me right aback. There was Charles with all the charm of the Stuart manner, looking his very best, every inch a King, on that day of public rejoicing ; and though he must have been tired to death with his rough crossing and long

ride, bowing all the way incessantly. Then when he halted with his staff, facing that vast body of trained soldiers standing at attention, with their arms grounded and every hand saluting, I thought I had never seen a brighter, prouder smile than what he flashed on them; and they met that pleasant greeting with black, sullen gloom! There! There! It is none of my concern, but I must say I felt for the King, and did not wonder his lips set close, and he turned sharply away to resume his triumphant ride."

"I think myself it was an error, but the army has got a bit out of hand of late to my thinking, and will require a little taking down, though whether Charles Stuart is the man to do it, *I* doubt. I'm off to visit Lambert, poor beggar, and cheer him up if I can, though I have heard on good authority that the King has declared already that two he cannot include in the general pardon are Lambert and Vane."

"Is Lambert still in the Tower?"

"Ay! Only very closely guarded and allowed few visitors. Are you staying on?"

"No. I leave to-morrow to be present at my niece's marriage to Sir James Fielding."

"What, that pretty child I saw once, Bridget—Something? She stayed with you the summer your wife nursed me."

"Conyngham, yes—no—Markham now, I mean. She married one of *you* during the troubles, and he was killed in battle."

"Markham, that good fellow, he *was* a loss; temperate, moderate, clear-headed, and as cool as you like under fire, it is a pity there are not more like him. I remember well going into his tent on the eve of the battle he fell in, to bid him farewell, as greatly to my regret I was ordered off with despatches. Markham was sitting writing, and I laughed at him about it not a little; we were good friends always, though he was of course greatly my junior."

"He said that his mother must hear only from himself, if he died, by letter—if he lived, by word of mouth—that he had married a girl left almost alone in a desolate house, as the only means of ensuring her safety with a protection warrant he

had with some difficulty secured for his mother; that gangs of disorderly soldiers were raiding the neighbourhood, and it was the best he could do for her at the time. He had done it with all his heart, for never had he seen a better or a fairer maid, and he had come across a good many. Those were his very words, I remember, and he added perhaps for a man over thirty it was ridiculous to say it, but he had really and truly fallen in love at first sight; and if he was spared he had no fear for the happiness of the future."

"I remember laughing at him for taking such a gloomy view of what, after all, was only expected to be a small affair on the morrow, but I could not get him to smile at his fears, poor fellow! In his case they proved to have been well founded.

"He said his puzzle was how to find a reliable messenger, and as, on going into the matter carefully, I found I actually passed through Rithycombe in the dead of night, I said if he would keep his own counsel and not get me into trouble, I would myself leave the letter at the Manor.

Poor fellow! How relieved he seemed. I am glad now I did it, though, of course, I had no business to have done it. So I left him to his writing, and only saw him again in the dusk, as I was mounting my charger. He gave the letter into my hand. I could not see the address, so never knew till now that his wife was your niece. I heard, of course, he had been killed, but no particulars. I suppose Madam Bridget is a rich heiress?"

"No, indeed, for the funny part of it is, her dowry cannot be found. It was hidden by her for safety, by the advice of her mother, and then, poor child, she had a time of terrible trouble, and an awful illness, and all that part of her life is an absolute blank. Of late, they tell me, she has tried so hard to remember her hiding-place, she nearly made herself ill again, and Sir James has had to forbid the subject being mentioned; and declares if the money *is* found it shall all be given away, for not a halfpenny will he touch. It was the only way to manage her. An old friend—well, you'll be interested to hear—Markham's mother has seen to

her wedding gear, and I am taking down a few oddments, for though the Manor lands are good, it will take years for the farmers to recover, and Mistress Bridget will have nothing of her own till they do."

"Did not Markham leave her anything?"

"All he could, but the property is strictly entailed, and goes to a distant cousin, and the money matters are so mixed up, it will take ages to sort out what really belonged to him."

"And at such an exciting time as this in our Kingdom's history, you can coolly turn your back on it all, and go bury yourself afresh in the heart of the country. Far better remain here and keep in touch with the march of events."

"Thank you, no! I am too old to care for fresh schemes, and am no courtier; maybe, if I stayed in London much longer, the sham and the hollowness of its fashionable life would lay hold on me. Each one for himself first, is the rule here, and those who climb swiftly to the top of the ladder of fame, give not even a glance at those they tread under in so doing. No doubt, in its way, the

country is hardly better morally, but there can't, in consequence of the relative numbers, be quite such a mass of iniquity around one."

"These domestic wars, to use a word of my own, have brought the scum to the top in right good earnest, but if *that* is allowed to settle again, how will any lasting good be gained? There, don't let me keep you any longer; remember when down my way, to come and post the country cousin up in the latest town news."

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Bridget had indeed almost made herself ill trying to force her mind back, to recall for herself the events that happened to her during those summer months of the preceding year. The last thing she was clear about was the letter from her Uncle Thomas with its hasty summons to her parents, read as they sat at breakfast in the parlour, and her mother's subsequent charge to her to hide the treasure. In vain she thought and thought, and hunted high and low, wandering about by day, and often at night when all was still, with a tiny silver lamp in her hand, searching

—peering—feeling—in any possible or impossible place that suddenly occurred to her.

Martha was quite frightened one night, when hearing someone going down the stairs very quietly, she cautiously opened her bedroom door and saw a tall, slender figure in her white night-dress, with silver lamp held high in her hand, going slowly down the stairs to the hall below.

At first she thought Mistress Bridget was sleep-walking, and held her breath in fear, but no! When she, in her turn, crept quietly after her, she found the girl was wide awake, with a tired, exhausted look on her face. She said she had been in bed a long while, and then thought of one place she had not looked in before—in vain, of course—that often and often she had come down like that without disturbing anyone; she was very sorry to have awakened Martha now. If only she could think or dream where she had hidden her father's prize-money, it would be such a relief; it quite haunted her that she could not.

Then it was Martha spoke to Sir James, and he at last prevailed upon Bridget to promise she

would give over looking and searching for the treasure, and try and forget, for love of him, that there was any money hidden at all. One day, shortly before that fixed for the wedding, Bridget was talking away to Sir James, Mrs. Markham and Martha being busily occupied in various important and necessary arrangements, when a listening look passed over the girl's face; she stopped speaking, and turned her head towards the door, as if expecting someone to enter; then, to the baronet's no little surprise, sprang up and clapped her hands gleefully.

"James, I remember!"

"Remember *what*, Bridget?"

"Where I hid father's treasure; just suddenly, as if someone whispered it in my ear, it has come back to me. I must go quickly and get it, for fear I should forget again."

"It is all to be given away, Bridget!"

"Yes, I know; but oh, the relief to think it has come back to me. How could I ever forget such an uncommon place? Martha, Martha, come at once!"

"Mistress, dear, I am so busy; should you mind waiting a little while?"

"I can't, Martha; indeed, it is such a very important thing I want you for; to help me carry down the hidden treasure."

"Good gracious, Mistress Bridget, what ails you, honey?"

"Nothing, dear, only I remember now where I put it, and I might forget again. Please be quick."

"Shall I come, too, Bridget?"

"Oh, no! We'll bring it down to you."

Quickly both mounted the stairs, and Martha called out in surprise, when, after a moment's doubt and perplexity, and a little fruitless fumbling and feeling over the wooden mantelshelf in the dormer room, the sliding panel gave way, and the secret cavity stood open, but empty of all save a crumpled piece of paper, on which, when smoothed carefully out, was found written a rough estimate of the coins, jewels, and few bits of plate, not handed over to the martyred King's cause, because Squire Conyngham considered them his daughter's dowry.

Poor Bridget! Her cry of astonishment brought Sir James running up; there was such a baffled, disappointed sound in it, and a very distressed look on the young face.

"Oh, James, it was such a beautiful place! Did you ever see a better? Now I also remember I thought it would be too quickly found, and moved the things elsewhere, but *where* I have not an idea!"

"Then we are just where we were before, and have no wonderful fortune to dispose of to deserving objects."

"It is no joke to me, but a great worry."

"Yes, I know; but that I shall not allow, child, for a moment; so now, if you don't wish to make us both most unhappy, you will think no more of the dowry. After the real troubles God has given us to bear, and helped us through, the loss of a handful or so of coins we shall, I hope, never miss or require, can only be a trifling matter, by no means worth fretting over."

After that the girl grew quite light-hearted, and

her happy laugh echoed through the rooms as of old, and so, surrounded by love and care, her second marriage day drew nigh.

Sir James made all his arrangements for the wedding, as unlike as possible to the quiet ceremony which Timothy, though not an eye-witness, on account of his wounds, described to him as having taken place almost a year ago, and Mrs. Markham helped him greatly.

Very fond had she become of her young daughter-in-law, and, wise and unselfish as ever, carefully refrained, on every occasion, from recalling Reginald Markham to her mind.

The doctor reassured them about the lapse of memory over those few months that had worried the girl so, considering the strain she had lived at, and the awful shock of the burning, without the terrible illness, were quite enough to have really turned her brain : the fact that Mistress Bridget had got through with only forgetfulness and nothing more to dread was matter for great thankfulness, and though, as all were aware, she had been told about those forgotten events, not

to remember them for herself was, in his opinion, a great mercy.

* * * * * *

So in the quaint old church—whose joyous bells had been ringing since daybreak, rung by many willing hands—before the carved screen, with its rich colouring, Bridget again changed her name. Her soft grey dress, of rich brocade, swept the uneven flooring, hidden as that really was by scattered flowers.

All the village was there, dressed in their very best, so that the building, and out to the road beyond, was just a pack of people, young and old.

Mrs. Markham's hands had trembled slightly as she secured the tiny velvet coif on the girl's short curls with a flashing diamond pin, one of her own treasures; and her thoughts would wander, even during the service, to the new-placed stone in the churchyard corner, where her only son lay buried. The proper registers signed, Sir James led his bride down the old building, out through the crowd of waiting, smiling people to the coach beyond, already packed for a short absence.

In his care for her, Sir James had insisted there should be no shouts or cheers, and that they should go straight away from Rithycombe at once. There was no restriction as to hats and handkerchiefs, and everyone flicked or waved one or the other as, to the music of the bells, the coachman whipped up his excited horses, and Sir James and Lady Fielding turned over a new page in their life's history. On the Manor lawns the tables groaned with the good cheer loaded on them; the Fielding children, big and little, were here, there, everywhere, helping, hindering, in the wildest delight and pleasure possible: and when the evening shadows fell the hall was cleared of furniture, the fiddlers scraped their best, the flutes squeaked, the horns brayed, and the big drum, under Hal Scott's energetic fingers, more than took its own part.

Up and down the middle, in and out the centre, bobbed and bowed and jumped, young and old alike, making up in action what they lacked in grace.

No bonfires blazed as of yore on the purple hills about. No, no! That would not do; *one* too

many had been lit in Rithycombe, but the bells rang out their chimes from morn till eve, and when the villagers and tenants of both parties trooped homewards down the avenue, all agreed that never had they had such a happy day in their lives, and all through little Madam! To think that the only wedding present she would allow Sir James to give her, was the pardon of the very wretches who had sought her life. God bless her!

Gossip said Sir James had been slow to agree to this request, and declared it was an unwise step, but had at last given in, only stipulating none of the ringleaders should settle again at Rithycombe.

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So in the whirligig of life, the kaleidoscope patterns change from light to dark, from bright to dim, using the self-same shapes and colours arranged only in a different order.

* * * * *

Many happy years went by in the old Manor House in the vale, though in the world beyond trouble and strife, battle and murder, plague and

pestilence, took see-saw turns with peace and prosperity, just as they do to-day.

If in 1662 all Englishwomen took a keen interest in Catherine of Braganza, flavoured with a strong touch of pity, all men's minds at the same time were fully occupied with the trial of Vane and Lambert, which concluded, as all know, by the former dying as a brave man, whilst drums beat their loudest round him to drown his voice, lest pity should be aroused in the thronging crowds, and rescue be attempted. The other, Lambert, trimmed his sails so well to the rulers of his destiny that his sentence was reprieved, and, banished to Guernsey, he lived there nearly thirty years, and, changing his Puritan belief, died a Roman Catholic.

For twenty years the happy life went on at Rithycombe, and then Madam fell ill so suddenly it came with a shock on all!

One morning early out rang a muffled peal from the church tower, solemn and slow, with every stroke vibrating to a great distance. Groups of startled villagers listened to the warning note, as in

dread and sorrow they waited for tidings in the avenue.

The soldier figure paced slowly up the drive; some said they *heard* his steps, others that he had actually brushed them by; only once he came in vain, the second time before he faded he turned to retrace his steps, and those who keenly watched said a white-robed figure walked beside him.

Certain it was that this time "Madam" was gone! Sir James could hardly believe it, it was an awful shock to him, though he took it very quietly. Lamentations, loud and many, were heard on all sides, the step-children and grandchildren mourned sadly over their great loss, for they had loved her truly. Very simply, in accordance with Bridget's strong wish, were the funeral arrangements made, but nothing could prevent its being a burying the like of which had not been seen before.

So many prayed for the honour of carrying her to the grave that the matter would have been a difficulty had not the step-sons and sons-in-law claimed this duty as their right, and so settled it.

From far and near the people flocked, villagers, townsfolk, tenants, tramping for miles and miles to pay the last tribute of respect to "Madam." The bells tolled very slowly; the ringers said afterwards it needed all their strength to get a sound out, but what a volume it was when it came—slower, deeper every time, and then as the long procession waited at the church door, silence—and silence unbroken on their part up to now. Sir James had chosen the spot for Lady Fielding's last resting-place next to the soldier's grave, with space alongside for himself, in preference to either of the old family vaults; and here in love and reverence beside Reginald Markham's flower-grown grave they laid their lady to rest, loved—regretted—honoured—as falls to the lot of few, the last of her race and name that the old Manorlands of Rithycombe would ever know.

Many a sympathizing hand touched Sir James' as he waited long beside the open grave, waited till all was as seemly as possible, and then turned slowly homewards in the summer sunshine. His kindly face looked worn and sad, and some said he

would not be here long; he was just wrapped up in Madam.

His children and grandchildren, with a goodly company of friends, were all beside him when he re-entered the Manor, left for once to take care of itself whilst the servants, young and old, followed in the sorrowful procession to the church.

Had it been left?

That question must remain for ever unanswered.

The hall had a solemn air about it, for there Madam's simple lying in state had taken place, when all who asked to do so, were allowed to look their last at the peaceful face, freed for ever from the lines of Earth, and in consequence looking years younger than her age.

The furniture was all pushed back against the walls, and white flowers were strewn around just as they had been left that morning. Over all, above all, was a strange penetrating chill, that made the strongest feel as if they had entered an ice grotto.

And so still!!

Not one of the footsteps caused a sound, though the floor was bare and the guests numer-

ous. On the spectators fell a strange awe, and all alike felt powerless to move or speak. There were many witnesses to see and vouch for the fact that when standing motionless, in the hall, in the great silence that prevailed, a bright white light streamed forth through the large open doorway leading directly into the kitchen; and it was not the light of the sun, for the room faced the wrong way for that, neither came it from the warm banked-up fire, for *that* could not send out such dazzling streams of light, reaching right into the hall itself, and growing brighter as they looked at it.

Full in this magic light, clearly and distinctly visible, standing close to the hearth itself—nay, apparently bending over a saucepan, stood Madam herself!

And she was quite transparent, they could see right through her, as if she had been a piece of painted glass; and though encircled by such a wonderful radiance, not even the faintest shadow was thrown by her figure. Just as many had so often seen her barely a fortnight ago, in her

simple morning dress, with kerchief folded neatly over the kindly heart, and matron's coif resting on the still dark hair. Busy stirring something with a spoon held in her mittened hands, so intent on her familiar task, she had no glance for them.

For a rare housewife had Madam become, taking the greatest pride in her still-room and dairy, and renowned not a little for her simples and cordials.

How long all watched her breathlessly, none could afterwards agree, probably only for a few seconds, that seemed far longer in such a state of tension.

At last Sir James found his voice, and called out clearly "Bridget," when instantly, as if shaken, the bright light wavered and paled; the figure lost its clearness of outline, became dim and misty, and had faded quite away before the last gleam went suddenly out, leaving a crowd of astonished people in what seemed to them for a minute, quite twilight, divided somewhat in opinion as to the details of what they had seen, but certain then and for evermore that, ghost or reality, it was Madam herself they had watched!

The cold feeling was also gone, and the hall struck close and oppressive with so many perfumed flowers all about.

With a heavy sigh, at last Sir James moved and led the way into the parlour where refreshments stood ready.

He went up to an old woman crying quietly in a far corner, and asked her softly if she had seen Madam, and what she thought of the Spirit's visit.

"My child, my child," sobbed the old body; "to see her with the kerchief on that I was ironing that sad morning when she called me and said how bad she felt. And her best silk mittens too, with the vine-leaf pattern. I feel as if my heart must break for grief, and yet how selfish of me to say so, Master dear, when you are so good about it too. It must be with some hope of comforting us that the mistress came back again; surely *we*, knowing what we do about the soldier always watching over her, can believe her object is to show how near the unseen country is where our loved ones pass. No doubt we shall see her often;

such a good creature could never return to do harm."

This reasoning comforted Sir James not a little, and helped him through that sad day as maybe nothing else could have done.

Often after that, the maids declared in summer nights a white-robed figure flitted up and down the stairs, or watched from the dormer window; but Sir James and Martha never saw her again, and inclined therefore to the belief that this was only fancy: but when long years had rolled away, with their constant change, and still the phantom figures came and went, there could be no "fancy" in the matter, and as "fact" it still holds force and power in that little Somersetshire village, where the golden letters on the Manor weathercock turn in the wind, and catch the light of the sun, just as in the days of old, before the haunting began which is said to go on at the present day.

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